

A CRITIQUE OF PAUL SEABRIGHT'S THE WAR OF THE SEXES

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A Review of the Book

The War of the Sexes: How Conflict and Cooperation Have Shaped Men and Women from Prehistory to the Present

By Paul Seabright. 2012.

Princeton University Press, Princeton, NY. 241 pages.

ISBN 978-0-691-13301-0 (Paperback, \$17.95).

In *The War of the Sexes*, Paul Seabright has produced a comprehensive review of sex differences in regards to cooperation and conflict stemming from evolutionary theories and biology. Seabright provides a strong review of basic theory, such that readers are introduced to Trivers' (1972), parental investment theory and Darwin's (1859) views of sexual selection to better understand the underlying motivations in our every day behaviours. Although it is a good read for someone interested in economics and sex differences in power, the book may cause debate over whether some of the ideas are sexist, as it implies men and women have different cognitive, emotional, and social strengths and weaknesses that are a product of natural selection. Given that this book presents scientific data from areas such as evolutionary psychology, anthropology, and biology, as well as economics, it provides an excellent framework for understanding sex differences and how they impact on us on a daily basis.

A major strength of this book was the introduction, where it begins with a modern day example of a man and woman flirting. The man flaunts his wealth, while the woman is cosmetically enhanced, and the author explains the origins of these differences and how it

affects the 'economic strategies' used today. Economic strategies are defined by Seabright as systematic ways of negotiating over any resource with economic value, or time and effort involved in interactions. There is a significant review of Buss and Schmitt's (1993) work on evolved sex differences, as based on sexual selection and parental investment theories. Seabright provides an accurate view of natural selection shaping human psychology while clearing up common misconceptions; for example, "natural selection has no interest in flattering or demeaning us or in justifying or condemning our common patterns of behavior" (p. 17), and "judging a theory about our evolutionary origins is certainly not according to whether it makes us feel uncomfortable" (p. 18).

The book is separated into two parts: prehistory, and today. The prehistory section contains the introduction and leads into a chapter on biological inheritance. Chapter 2 compares humans with other non-human primates and other species, and focuses on signaling and how men and women can manipulate these signals. Chapter 3 examines emotions, with a central theme of how emotions are innate personal experiences and yet humans try to hide them from public view. The fourth chapter pertains to primate inheritance, specifically how our primate ancestors "used resource scarcity as weapons in the sex war" (p. 21). An important aspect discussed in chapter 4 is how human's long period of childhood changed human evolution forever. The following 3 chapters focus on men and women today, and how our modern environment potentially influences our hunter-gatherer brains.

One important question Seabright attempts to answer in chapter 7 concerns why women make a lower salary than men for the same job (p. 22). Seabright offers a variety of explanations: differences in talents/aptitudes, as well as how men and women cooperate lead to unequal interactions between the sexes. Chapter 8 examines cooperation, as well as the effects of conflict, such as discrimination the workplace in men and women. Intriguingly, the author makes a very important point: both men and woman at the bottom of society, and the exclusion of women from the top of society, are causes for concern (p. 23). In addition to providing valuable information on cooperation and conflict in men and women, the book offers insight in how to make good economic, political, and ethical choices. "Learning how our emotions and instincts are constructed helps us to navigate more flexibly in the world we have created" (p. 24).

Seabright does not fully address how context may interact with behaviours that underlie sex differences. For example, Balliet et al. (2011) argue that social context influences the amount of cooperation observed in men and women. They found male-male interactions to be more cooperative than female-female interactions, and women cooperate more in mixed-sex groups. In addition, after multiple interactions, women cooperate less than men, which implies that human cooperation can depend on with whom we have to cooperate with and how often.

An additional point that could be clarified includes the idea that "sex is not just about reproduction, about making new humans: it's about all the alliances and rivalries that it stimulates" (p. 6). Although sex is primarily for reproduction, over time it bonds individuals

together, often mediated by the release of specific hormones. Research on rat populations shows how oxytocin is released more in female rats than male rats and this promotes affiliative or cooperative behaviours when in a group (Brown & Grunberg, 1995) however, this should not be confused with the idea that sex is consciously used for forming alliances or rivalries. Further, it should be noted that although there many studies to support the idea that men and women display differences in terms of cooperation and conflict, there are situations where sex differences are not as robust, such as verbal abilities (e.g., Hyde & Linn, 1988). This does not refute the idea of evolved sex differences, instead it provides evidence that our evolved mechanisms are flexible based on an individual's environment. Overall, research supports the main argument in the book: men and women do face different challenges and therefore there will be conflict between members of the opposite sex. It is also important to highlight the fact that although there is conflict between the sexes, Seabright mentions there is also conflict between members of the same sex for access to preferred mates, for example.

While each chapter does a thorough job of explaining relevant information, the book overall could use more academic studies and references to appeal to a scholarly, as well as lay audience. This said, emphasizing the origins of sex differences in behavior can be difficult to write about in a sensitive manner, and the author does an excellent job of defending the sciences. Readers may not agree with some of the underlying evolutionary foundations of human behavior, as it not only implies we have little control, but it means that men and women are in fact different in some aspects due to natural selection. However, putting these moral issues aside, this book offers an intellectually stimulating read interjected with small snippets of humor. *The War of the Sexes* is easy to read and provides readers with a basic understanding of human psychology as it relates to our daily lives. Overall, this is a great book for anyone interested in evolutionary psychology or sex differences in economics, power and politics, but especially people who are curious to understand the underlying reasons why humans act the way they do.

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Laura Robertson is a student in the Department of Psychology at Saint Mary's University in Halifax, Canada. She is currently completing an honours degree in psychology, and working as a research assistant on a wide variety of ethological projects. Her primary research interests are evolutionary and hormonal influences on behaviour, sex differences, cooperation and jealousy. Her thesis project examined the affect of infertility on jealousy and blame after infidelities, in addition to various studies on evolved sex difference in tattoo content and revenge.

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