

THE EVOLUTION OF *THE EVOLUTION OF DESIRE*

Carol Cronin Weisfeld

Department of Psychology, University of Detroit Mercy, Detroit, USA.

weisfecc@udmercy.edu

A Review of the Book

The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating (3rd edition, 2016)*

By David M. Buss. 2016

Basic Books, New York, 350 pages.

ISBN 9780465097760 (paperback, \$12,66 USD)

In 1994 David M. Buss authored *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*. By that time, Evolutionary Psychologists had created ripples of excitement with groundbreaking theoretical (Trivers, 1972) and integrative (Kenrick, et al., 1993) publications. In his book, Buss described much of that previous work alongside his account of dozens of research projects done within his own research lab, then at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. *The Evolution of Desire* found that sweet spot between the academic tome and the pop psych paperback – offering solid evidence, presented in accessible and entertaining language. *The Evolution of Desire* went on to become a worldwide best-seller in the field of Evolutionary Psychology. In 2003 Buss produced the second edition, which contained two more chapters presenting more research, that were added on at the end; many readers, however, were disappointed that the rest of the book was essentially untouched, unrevised. In 2016, the third edition of *The Evolution of Desire* was published. Does it meet with readers' expectations of some new synthesis, some new level of integration? The aim of this review is to address that question.

Full disclosure requires that I declare my interests here. I have taught classes in Human Sexuality (undergraduate- and graduate-level) for close to 30 years. For most of that time, I have required that my students read *The Evolution of Desire* along with a general text, Bruce King's *Human Sexuality Today* (2015) and other recommended readings. My students like both books; but they have been astonished by the honesty and complexity of thought they find in the former volume. This, of course, is often the

reaction when undergraduate students first confront ideas from Evolutionary Psychology: “This feels so true. It fits my experience, and my partner’s experience.” In contrast, graduate students, who often have had more exposure to Evolutionary Psychology, sometimes have seen *Desire* as perhaps facile and simplistic, not presenting the complexity of viewpoints within Evolutionary Psychology. I must say that, when the second edition arrived, in 2003, I was disappointed, for the reasons mentioned above. I continued to use the second edition for teaching, despite the fact that I did not find the level of integration there that I sought. My undergraduate students, expecting me to help them with the integration, seemed not to care, giving the book the same glowing reviews that students had offered in previous years. In 2016 the third edition arrived. Have I found what I have been looking for, from the point of view of the teaching professor?

My first impression upon receiving my copy of edition three was that, although it had the same number and focus of chapters as the 1994 edition (with the two add-on chapters gone), it was longer – by 100 pages. My hopes rose. Then I realized that the 3rd edition was published in a larger font size: 11 points, as compared to 10 points, in the earlier two editions. My hopes sank, even though my tired eyes were thrilled. So I re-read the book carefully, with the 2nd and 3rd editions side-by-side, so as to compare and contrast them. Yes, there are changes, many of them. These are some of the patterns of changes I discovered.

- 1) There is a modesty, a crediting of others, now in the writing, which was not there in earlier editions. For example, compare these sentences:

(1994 edition, p. 4) “To explore as many mating domains as possible, I launched over fifty new studies.” *This sentence became:*

(2016) edition, p. 6) “To explore as many mating domains as possible, my lab subsequently launched over 100 new scientific studies.”

(1994 edition, p. 25) “These findings provide the first extensive cross-cultural evidence supporting the evolutionary basis for the psychology of human mating.” *This sentence is gone.*

- 2) There is a toning down, with some flashier, more attention-grabbing, phrasing and material gone. For example:

(1994 edition) – the title of chapter 2 was “What Women Want” and chapter 3 was “Men Want Something Else.”

(2016 edition) – the title of chapter 3 is “What Men Want.”

Again, in 1994, page 5, this sentence appeared: “Strategies are essential for survival on the mating battlefield.” That sentence is nowhere found in the 2016 edition.

While I agree with the general decision to come down a couple notches in the literary drama, I regret that some content, like the material on genital mutilation in Chapter 6, is also gone. It’s important to place these behaviors in context, in order for students to understand their imagined function in the broader context of destructive mate retention tactics – which appear in different form, in every culture.

- 3) There is quite a bit of new material, well-integrated in the 2016 version of the book. New content on sexual orientation appears in Chapters 1 and 2, alongside content which appeared in an add-on chapter in 2003. More material on symmetry appears in Chapter 2, and a new section on “Deal Breakers” has been added. Chapter 3 offers more data on male strategies, the changing importance of chastity, and patterns of re-marriage. Chapter 5 has a deeper discussion of the importance of humor, art and music. Chapter 6 presents new material on violence as a product of sexual jealousy. Chapter 7 offers a presentation of “Error Management Theory” as a framework for understanding miscommunication between males and females. Chapter 10 presents additional material on cultural issues.

Some of that new content is directly focused on the interests of females. Chapter 2 offers a nice discussion of what happens when women attain powerful positions, and how women’s preferences may change in orderly ways, depending on their status. Chapter 2 also has a deeper discussion of what is actually at stake in terms of female reproductive investment. Chapter 4 presents material on female orgasm; this new section does away with some of the speculative material formerly found in an add-on chapter in the 2003 edition, and it presents the empirical research in a tightly disciplined argument that calls for more research. Chapter 7 has a major new section on sexual assault and its impact.

Some of that new content in the 2016 edition relates to what is added to the mix by social media. Chapter 4 has new material on hookups, and on internet pornography. Chapter 5 has new material, thoughtfully integrated with earlier ideas, on the role of social media in attracting a partner. This information is especially useful for anyone planning to use the book in the classroom setting, with college students who are uncritically enthusiastic about using social media to manage their young lives.

Much entertaining and enlightening material has been retained in this third edition. For instance, the comparative material on mating behaviors, from the earlier editions, still provides illuminating examples for the reader. The cuckoo’s murderous behavior helps students to understand cuckoldry; the male Mormon cricket is a great example of sex-role reversal; and the description of male-male competition in elephant seals helps students to grasp the idea of sexual selection.

Are there pieces still missing, in this new revised and updated edition of *The Evolution of Desire*? The absence of discussion of biological mechanisms remains a disappointment; to be fair, this is a broader criticism of Evolutionary Psychology and not this book alone. Some important concepts, like homogamy, are not even mentioned in the book and so the word is not in the index. Names of hormones, like testosterone and estrogen and oxytocin, likewise are not to be found in the index and my search did not find much about them in the text, either. That is a pity, as the power of these evolved biological mechanisms only adds more evidence to the arguments made throughout the book, about human predispositions to engage in particular behaviors around mate selection and retention.

The 2016 edition does not do everything that one might want. But the breadth of what it does offer, and the engaging style, are very impressive. As the book jacket

advertises, *The Evolution of Desire* is indeed a classic in the Evolutionary Psychology literature. And, this time around, David M. Buss really does offer readers, including teachers and students, many aspects that are new and improved.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Carol Cronin Weisfeld is a Professor of Psychology at University of Detroit Mercy, where she teaches courses on Human Development, Human Sexuality, and Health Psychology. Along with Glenn Weisfeld and Lisa M. Dillon, she is editor of the forthcoming volume, *The Psychology of Marriage: An Evolutionary View across Cultures* (in press, Lexington Books).

REFERENCES

- Kenrick, D. T., et al. (1993). Integrating evolutionary and social exchange perspectives on relationship: effects of gender, self-appraisal, and involvement level on mate selection criteria. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 64, 951-969. [DOI](#)
- King, B.M. (2015). *Human Sexuality Today* (8th edition). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Trivers, R. L. (1972) Parental investment and sexual selection. In B. Campbell (Ed.) *Sexual selection and the descent of man, 1871-1971* (pp 136-179). Chicago, Aldine.

* The books site for Amazon identifies this 2016 edition as the 4th edition.