

## THE GHOSTS OF POLYGAMY'S PAST

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*A Review of the Book*

### ***Out of Eden: The Surprising Consequences of Polygamy***

By David P. Barash. 2016.

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Human mating systems can be a contentious social, cultural, and political issue. Not only do the individuals entering the relationship have stakes in institutions such as marriage, but their families, communities, and cultures are often invested in the consequences of these relationships too. Polygamy, the pattern of copulating with two or more mates, is the prevailing mating system, at least in vertebrates, mammals, and primates. Monogamy, the practice of sexually and/or socially exclusive pair bonding, on the other hand, is rarer in nature. But how do we humans compare? And what should we draw from these comparisons? The vow "until death do we part" or "till death us depart" as used before 1662 is suggestive of the long-held importance of monogamy, at least in the Western cultural imaginary. Still, the answers might surprise some western readers and is the topic of *Out of Eden: The Surprising Consequences of Polygamy*.

David P. Barash, the author, is an evolutionary biologist in the psychology department of the University of Washington. His new offering is a timely follow-up to a book he previously co-authored with his wife Judith Eve Lipton: *The Myth of Monogamy; Fidelity and Infidelity in Animals and People* (2001) – the first popular science book to examine fidelity in mating systems through genetic science. It demonstrated that sexual monogamy is exceedingly rare in nature, in mammals, and trigger warning: it's rare in humans too. *Out of Eden* deals with the same subject matter, though, this text attempts to update the popular readership on the current state of knowledge with data accumulated since 2001. It also builds upon the conversation to outline some of the rarely discussed consequences of polygamy as a cultural enterprise, suggesting that our

western sociocultural commitment to monogamy might blind us to the biological reality that we are still very much haunted by "the ghosts of polygamy past", and that this past has some very direct implications for us today.

The beginning of the book addresses notions that have recently gained a large audience, advocating for an evolved human disposition to promiscuity. In contrast, there are also those who see polygamy, as opposed to strict social and sexual monogamy, as something "contrary to the laws of nature", "justice" (p. 13). These accounts have been eager to formulate a 'biological' story seemingly aligned more with their own beliefs and proclivities than the science at hand, but they are incorrect, says Barash. Academic constructionists and feminist scholars, who are, in many cases, unable to even entertain concepts suggesting evolved human sex differences, and thus the differences in how polygamy might play out in human nature, are also noted. The beginning of the book acts as a firm corrective to each of these misbegotten beliefs, neither strict monogamy or a predisposition to promiscuity characterize our species in Barash's view, and sex differences in mating behaviour and preferences are numerous (he lists them). Nevertheless, the author shows dialectical generosity, and he is considerate of most points of view. This makes for a good-natured read – unless you are one of the co-authors of *Sex at Dawn*, which receives a page-length repudiation (pp. 207).

To transcend some of the subject's sociocultural stigma he extends the fundamental research in animal mating strategies to include humans. Comparative evidence from the zoological and primate domains is strongly suggestive of our polygamous, or rather our polygynous (one male multiple females) "harem keeping" past. He argues that characteristics observed in humans are consistent with other harem-keeping species such as the great apes, deer, and various seal species, which are sexually dimorphic in reproductive variance, body size, aggression, and maturation. Cross-cultural research follows, showing that historically most cultures -708 out of 849 (or 83%)- were preferentially polygamous, that males in all cultures are more likely to be interested in sexual novelty, they report seeking more lifetime sexual encounters, they are more likely to be unfaithful, less likely to regret casual sex, and so on (for full list see pp. 64). The topic of female polygamy (more specifically polyandry) is not ignored. However, it is rare in mammals, rare as a human cultural system and culturally suppressed in many societies, and Barash finds less, but not insignificant, evidence to draw from to support the claim that monogamy isn't our default setting.

The middle chapters review the main consequences of polygyny in detail: patterns in sex behaviour, parenting, and adultery. We are also treated to an exploratory chapter on the hypothetical origins of genius, homosexuality, and god ('the ultimate harem keeper'). A notable focus of the book is the high level of male intrasexual violence common in polygamous populations, and how monogamy, when implemented, mediates some of these behaviours. This has to be one of the most interesting and consequential stories never to make it into the popular consciousness. He shows that competition between males, for mates, favours a small number of big strong males and subjugates most other competitors to reproductive disappointment. Lower status males in polygamist systems are much less likely to find a long-term mate, and thus will have fewer reproductive opportunities. Those with fewer opportunities are likely to increase mating effort in some socially unfortunate ways, by increasing risky, competitive, aggressive and otherwise socially undesirable behaviours, so to avoid celibacy. Monogamist systems

equal the playing field, effectively reducing the operational sex ratio, mitigating the competition for mates.

Monogamy as a cultural enterprise is a more recent addition to human reproductive coupling. In the chapter covering monogamy, Barash explores the question of its evolution providing insight into another great, yet unresolved, biocultural story – our desire for long-term relationships. Humans give birth to rather needy offspring, which ultimately requires significant parental investment. In this rationale, monogamy, or rather its correlates, bi parental care, and cooperative breeding has evolved through selection for pair-bonding behaviours and reasonably long-term mating strategies. Another hypothesis suggests that monogamy might also be a mechanism that increases paternity confidence. These findings might seem to support some of our contemporary western biases. However, DNA fingerprinting, cheating, and divorce rates provide counter-evidence that suggests our modern monogamous practices are still in tension with our polygamous tendencies. To resolve some of that tension, he illustrates a continuum from comparative morphology looking at testicular metrics. It turns out highly polygamous species like the chimpanzee have large testes that produce large amounts of sperm in order to facilitate competition against other males in the reproductive tract of the female chimps. Species on the monogamist end of the spectrum, however, have relatively small testis and fewer sperm, their mating strategy shows little evidence of traits selected for competition. Humans sit somewhere in between these two morphological ends; evidence like this (more is provided) has led some authors to suggest we are only "moderately polygamous" or "monogamish". The last two chapters tussle with the complexities of these competing attributes.

Insights from these chapters stand as a profound example of the power of sexual selection on cultural expression, and vice versa. However, some notable consequences of polygamy seem to be missing. For example: how monogamous multicultural systems might interact with incoming populations whose cultures are still wedded to polygamy. Or specifically, intergroup conflict that might arise in the mating landscape due to the spread of competing group-beneficial norms (see Heinrich, 2010; Heinrich, Boyd & Richerson, 2012). He also touches on the relaxed sexual selection under monogamy, but the consequences of relaxation on male phenotypes, conjectural or otherwise, is absent. Another interesting topic I thought he might broach (but didn't), is the relationship between the fathers' reproductive longevity on male-biased mutation load and the population-level genetic ramifications of polygamy. Polygyny both prolongs and delays male reproduction (Cochran & Harpending, 2013) since older fathers carry a higher load of heritable deleterious mutations. I thought this book would have benefited from the inclusion of some robust discussion on the demographic consequences of polygamy.

The text is short, ~200 pages minus the reference material. It is clear, enjoyable, and in terms of polygamy being an innate human inclination, he is ultimately convincing. It is an entertaining read, filled with quotes from philosophers, religious leaders, poets and otherwise historically interesting individuals. Unlike some of his historic resources, Barash avoids moralizing, but that said, one does not have to read between lines to see that he views monogamy as a progressive social contrivance worth understanding, worth perusing. Whatever way we choose to navigate these inclinations we ought to be informed by our evolutionary context. His last chapter summarises that context and allays the strong determinist accusations that an evolutionist perspective on this topic

might provoke – the appropriate room is given to self-determination – he certainly sees humans as unique in that they can transcend their biological inclinations, despite their evolved inclinations. *Out of Eden* provides a depth of evidence that may challenge many lay readers' preconceptions. It is recommended reading for those in the social sciences interested in the evolutionary implications of human mating systems, and a popular readership that, more than ever before, appears to be actively investigating alternative mating behaviours.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Matt H. J. Chaumont** is an evolutionary biologist. He studied psychology and behavioural ecology at Monash/Uppsala University and holds a Hons degree from Western Sydney University in behavioural ecology (Animal Ecology Lab). He is interested in past coevolutionary arms races in the Australian reed warbler, and relaxed selection in human and avian populations. Has previously reviewed Nick Davies' book *Cuckoo: Cheating by Nature* (*Emu – Austral Ornithology*).

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