

Men against Women and Vice Versa

Feminists (and others) have argued that men conspire to reduce the freedoms of women. Some evolutionarily-minded biologists and anthropologists have responded that because men and women are interdependent with regard to reproductive success -- the members of any population receiving half their genes from each of the two sexes -- it is not reasonable to suppose that the members of either sex could gain by conspiring collectively against the members of the other.

There may be confusion on both sides, and the issues are so complex that it is not surprising. One can leave aside the question of conspiracy and ask whether the direction of evolution of one sex can be such as to reduce the overall reproduction of the other sex. To make the question applicable to the behavior of humans, we also have to consider whether or not one sex can change even briefly (that is, profit reproductively by changing) so as to reduce the reproduction of the other sex (as a whole). If evolutionary change in the appropriate direction can occur -- in either behavioral or nonbehavioral traits -- then I think it is fair to assume that parallel behavioral conspiracies are possible.

Before we take up the above question, though, we can answer some more obvious everyday questions about male (or female) conspiracies. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that some collectives of either sex might conspire (or seem to conspire when merely agreeing incidentally) to reduce the freedoms of some portions of the other sex; or even that all the members of one sex might conspire or change in a direction deemed undesirable by the members of the other sex. Indeed, it seems evident that men have, throughout history, cooperated with other men to reduce the freedoms of women ("rights" can be used in place of "freedoms" here unless one is willing to argue that men and women somehow do not naturally or normally have the same rights as men!). The point here is not that collectives of men have conspired against women to reduce the reproduction of women as a whole (even if they did that incidentally by lowering the reproduction of some women without sufficiently increasing the reproduction of others) but that they have done it to manipulate the reproductive activities of some women -- presumably women who are relevant -- so as to serve their own (male) reproductive interests. The reason males don't necessarily increase the reproduction of the women they "help" (or reproduce with) rather than hurt is that the males have really been helping themselves; whether or not the women they use to do this actually increase their reproduction over what it might have been with other men or in other situations is incidental.

To understand how this works, it helps to remember that all humans live in kin groups, and that there are both primary and secondary reasons for any kind of social behavior. Moreover, it is not necessary that no woman ever be able to exploit a rule, imposed by collectives of men and restricting the freedoms of women, for the rule accurately to be regarded as imposed by men.

A primary reason for a tendency evolving is the particular reason that causes the behavior to evolve and (usually) maintains it. A secondary reason is one that capitalizes on the existence of the behavior, or follows from it, but would not by itself cause the behavior to evolve or (usually) to be maintained. Obviously, a secondary reason can sometimes become responsible for maintaining a tendency that evolved for other (primary) reasons.

Consider that a woman may be able to capitalize on a cultural rule instituted by men, as a part of aiding the reproduction of her male relatives. Thus, a rule that restricts the freedom of women may nevertheless be exploited by some women to participate in the restriction of the freedom of other women -- for example, their male relatives' spouses. That this happens does not mean that the rule necessarily was imposed by women or even that its existence is supported by any woman. Even if some women sometimes support the actual existence of a cultural rule this does not mean that it was instituted by women or that if women in general were able to decide its fate they would vote to keep it.

Because a rule was instituted by members of one sex as a restriction on members of the other sex also

does not mean that it could not come to be viewed by members of the supposedly victimized sex as beneficial to them, so that members of the originally victimized sex could feasibly (secondarily) become even entirely responsible for maintaining the rule.

So long as men's and women's interests conflict to any degree, in their interactions as individuals, there will be ways that members of either sex can use cooperation with other members of their sex, who share a particular interest that diverges from the interests of members of the other sex, to cooperate so as to realize to a greater degree their own interests rather than having to yield completely to the interests of the member of the other sex with which they are interacting.

Thus, some men may gain in many or even most circumstances from the existence of rules that men can have multiple wives simultaneously if they wish (one might say, *enough* men, in many societies, because those who might gain most by this rule are also most likely to be the ones with the most power, therefore the capability to institute and maintain it). Women may gain if their male relatives are able to take advantage of such rules, or if the curve of resource control by males is steep enough that it is better for either particular women or women as a whole to be allowed to choose polygamous marriages if they wish; but women will not often gain because their spouses become polygamous (unless, in cases where the curve of resource control by men is very steep, sororal polygyny is enforced). These facts mean that in most circumstances all women probably gain from the existence of rules that restrict men to one wife at a time. Men may gain if the husbands of their female relatives are restricted to one wife at a time, and if their competitors are, but not often if they themselves are as well. These arguments do not mean that all women are always expected to oppose polygyny, or even that no women ever will wish their husbands to become polygynous; in some societies the duties of the second wife have come to be such as to cause her to serve almost as the employee or slave of the first wife.

(Always when I use the word "gain" as I have above and below, I mean in evolutionary -- reproductive -- terms; and I should add that I reject entirely the implication of some of my colleagues that what humans should, on evolutionary grounds, be expected to do is what they would gain the most by doing *if there were no cultural rules*. Rather, I expect people universally to be *evolved* to comprehend and take into account the costs and benefits of whatever rules prevail in the cultural milieu in which they grow up and live -- including, of course, the costs and benefits of evading or bypassing them under different circumstances. I am not trying to describe or identify morality and immorality here but to predict likely combinations of events or actions, or account for observed tendencies from evolutionary logic. I should add that there is no implication in any of these arguments that any particular behaviors are either justified or inevitable. Biologists remain woefully ignorant of the connections between genes and phenotypes, but no modern evolutionary biologist would argue for a synonymy between tendencies that are expected to be evolved and behaviors that are actually observed. To say a behavioral tendency is expected to have evolved, or even has evolved, does not mean that it is genetically determined or ontogenetically inevitable. It is one of the most elementary facts of biology that phenotypes are plastic. One of the reasons for the complexity of human sociality is that people use this fact in their everyday interactions with others to cause them to do things they never expected, dreamed, hoped, or in some cases even wanted to do.)

Arguments paralleling those given above can be applied in many circumstances. Thus, men may conspire -- or just agree without conspiracy -- that rape laws should be constructed and enforced so as to provide only mild or no penalties for rape in some circumstances or for certain women. Under some general kinds of power structures within societies, men might gain from tacitly or otherwise agreeing not to rape one another's wives or relatives while also tacitly or otherwise ignoring or diminishing the significance of rapes of women belonging to other social or kin groups; again, women can scarcely gain by such agreements among men. It seems unlikely to me that women, either in particular or in general, would ever gain from such attitudes among men. However, men sometimes lose more as a result of rape than do females; when rape is kept secret, males (and some females too) will have some likelihood of investing in juveniles unrelated to them.

Similar arguments obviously can be applied to abortion, publicizing of menstruation (hence, publicizing of the period of fecundability), the right to vote, competition for jobs, control of resources, etc. The list of relevant issues is very long indeed.

From the peculiarities of competitions and confluences of interest that occur within and between the sexes and within and between social and kin groups, unexpected coalitions arise. Thus, in Wisconsin, when a coalition of (mainly? entirely?) women sought to begin the process of altering laws that required a farm wife to pay inheritance tax on the farm if her husband died first but not her husband if she died first, they apparently succeeded because an influential male legislator (one of a majority of such, I would imagine, in the Wisconsin Legislature!) suddenly took their side, standing and declaring forcefully that he wished to avoid having his own daughters thus victimized (personal communication from June Miller Weisberger, a lawyer who was one of those spearheading this campaign).

Now let us return to the original question: Can the members of one sex improve their reproduction by changing in such a way as to reduce the reproduction of the other sex as a whole? If the primitive female organisms, early in the history of the evolution of sexual reproduction, could have thought about such things as rights, freedoms, justice, and fairness, would they have deplored the overall evolutionary direction taken by primitive males and seen it as contrary to their interests and the interests of the offspring they were jointly producing with the males? Because the genes of each generation are derived equally from the two sexes of ancestors, it might seem unreasonable to answer yes. But consider this passage:

"The cost of sexuality . . . does not refer to the genetic materials as such, but to the genetic materials in which the parent invests. It is the cost of omitting genetic material from zygotes destined to receive expensive parental investment and of having this genetic material replaced by genetic material from a partner who does not invest in the zygote, or who invests less. As in gamete dimorphism, it is a result of competition among members of the sex investing less in each offspring for mating privileges with the sex investing more in each offspring. It represents a diversion of parental effort -- from contributions that might enhance reproductive competition with other species or asexual forms, to mating effort, which only affects the question of which males within the species will be most successful in mating. It is a diversion, however, that may help the individual carrying it out. Thus males which devote all of their reproductive effort to improving their mating success (by means other than by giving the female material benefits) may be viewed as parasites of the parental effort of their mates. They pay no cost of diverted parental effort except through their daughters. Yet, as a consequence, ultimately, of the dimorphism of gametes and their specialization to unite only with unlikes, a female in such a species cannot improve her reproduction by producing only males if she thereby creates a local surplus of males, reducing the number of matings available to her sons. Nor can she win by producing males which divert mating effort to parental effort if other females' sons which do not do this achieve sufficiently more matings to secure a greater genetic representation among descendants. . . . If females favor males who reciprocate or show parental effort, then how could nonreciprocating males secure enough matings to win as a class, reducing the extent of [benefits] from males available to females? Aside from changes in the extrinsic environment, the only obvious way this can occur is through deception and desertion by males, the likelihood of which cannot be detected or entirely avoided by females. Such deception and desertion need not be of great magnitude in individual cases for evolution to proceed toward lower male parental effort against the interest of all females and the more parental males. . . . Monogamy, then, and symmetry in the male-female contract -- which seems always to be secondary in higher organisms (arthropods and vertebrates) -- must evolve only when parental effort by males is so rewarded that less parental males cannot as a class outrace their more parental fellows . . ."

Two questions about the reproductive success of each of the two sexes must be lifted out of the above passage: For each we must ask (1) whether the overall reproduction of either sex is increased or

decreased by the changes occurring in the other sex, and (2) whether particular individuals of either sex are having their reproduction reduced by the changes that are being favored in the other sex.

Consider the evolutionary imposition of a cost of sexuality, as defined above, in a species changing from equal investment in the zygote as a result of primitive isogamy to anisogamy -- to a lesser investment in the zygote by males as a result of males evolving to gain from selection prior to the zygote stage (that is, by males exerting an increasing proportion of their effort in exploiting the increasing commitment of females to zygotic success). Because this process is essentially parasitism by males of parental investment (commitment to the success of the zygote) by females, there seems to be little doubt that sometimes -- and sometimes for long times -- one sex as a whole indeed can change in directions prejudicial to the actual reproductive output of the other sex as a whole. The reason it nevertheless continues (the reason anisogamy evolves) is that the individual males who further the trend will tend to have the reproductive edge over their fellows, and to a degree sufficient to make up for the fact that the particular attributes that cause their success reduce the overall reproduction of the particular females whose gametes they, as a collective, fertilize. Another factor also enters in, and this is the continuing significance of recombination (sexuality): unless sexuality is favored, males cannot continue to evolve to parasitize females, for those females who give up sexuality and simply maximize reproduction via parthenogenesis will outreproduce the combination of sexual females and males. Nevertheless, sexuality can exist without a large cost -- without one sex parasitizing the other (as in isogametic forms and in monogamous species in which the two sexes invest approximately equally in their jointly produced offspring). We knew all along that females can evolve to reduce (even eliminate) the reproduction of males as a whole -- through parthenogenesis -- they do it all the time. And we know that human females could *conspire* to do it through creating (technologically) either parthenogenesis or egg-egg zygotes. **

Thus, it would seem that males have indeed evolved to reduce the reproduction of females as a whole, through the original evolution of anisogamy. It would seem, also, that they are capable of doing it in behavioral ways, even through conspiracy, and that they probably have done so many times during the history of cultural rules. In both circumstances they did it without liberating themselves from depending on females, although for females the only option in this direction may indeed be liberating themselves from dependence on males.

* Alexander, R. D. and G. Borgia. 1979. On the origin and basis of the male-female phenomenon. In: M. S. and N. A. Blum (eds). 1979. *Sexual Selection and Reproductive Competition in Insects*. NY: Acad. Press, pp. 417-440.

Note: This essay was written partly in response to a discussion in the EHB Faculty meeting of 3 Oct, and partly in response to a referee of Beverly Strassmann's manuscript hypothesizing the underlying reasons for Dogon women spending their menstrual periods in a hut constructed for that purpose. I thank Laura Betzig for her insights into a previous version, which enabled me to correct some inadequacies.

** See attached page titled: "The Disappearance of the Human Male."