

Comments on monogamy, desertion, and the geneticist's speech

Most or all of you now seem agreed that any presumed "leveling" selective effects of monogamy in human society do not necessarily lead to deleterious effects (on society? or whom?), because they primarily change the direction of selection (especially on males) rather than "deleting" a main source of selection as the "famous geneticist" suggested. And you also seem to agree that there are benefits to offspring (juveniles) in monogamy because of added parental care. Some of you implied, as well, that this is "good" and that monogamy tends to imply commitment and faithfulness and honor and other things that go along with modern day notions of morality, and that these things somehow entered into your arguments about monogamy, especially your arguments with the geneticist who said that monogamy is harming "society" because the "best" (presumably he meant "genetically superior") men can no longer maximize their reproductive output. Many of you suggested that helping babies is why monogamy came to be the rule in our society; obviously that outcome is something no one is about to take issue with, regarding desirability or morality.

Okay, let's go a step further. Graduated income taxes, welfare, charitable organizations that virtually demand contributions from everyone who can afford it, the prospect of free medical care for all, and many other programs people usually label as "social" also tend to "equalize" opportunities and change directions of selection. How does one decide which of these practices, like monogamy, simply (or primarily) change directions of selection rather than "remove" it, and which are likely beneficial (to whom and how?) and which at least cannot be judged deleterious (to whom and how?). Are they all to be regarded as "good" because they help those who are at least temporarily at a disadvantage? Do the people in society as a whole tend to view them and monogamy in the same way? Why not? Are they not the same general kinds of cultural impositions as the one our famous geneticist was espousing? Are you going to call him a Nazi if he is against graduated income taxes or is for reducing welfare or against free medical care for everyone? Where do you draw the line when you invoke ideological as opposed to biological arguments?

Here are some examples of biological arguments: Monogamy does not eliminate selection because people still choose mates carefully under monogamy (maybe more carefully, sometimes). Groups of organisms that have been essentially as monogamous as humans are in our kind of society for very long times, such as songbirds, do not appear to have been affected at all by increased mutational loads. Monogamy favors a different kind of male, one who invests more in a smaller set of offspring and tends to remain committed to a single mate; that doesn't mean he is somehow inferior to a male successful under polygyny. When directions of selection change, the "best" male is really just a different kind. One needn't attach different values to the two kinds or attempt to compare them on a better versus worse scale.

Here are some examples of ideological arguments: This man is a moral moron. He's a Nazi who probably just wants to have multiple wives and believes he would personally gain if the rules were changed. Monogamy is good; polygyny is evil. Men who think polygyny is okay are also evil; they're the kind that cheat on their wives. This guy should have his funds cut off, not to mention some other things as well.

If you are not as inclined to make an ideological argument (at least not one as vehement as some of those some of you made in answering the question about monogamy) about the issues I raise above, maybe you can explain why.

Oh, I didn't mention -- at least in the question, but I'm sure you had already read about it in the text, hadn't you -- that monogamy apparently didn't just happen because it helped

offspring and led to fidelity and morality and helping the kids and all of that stuff -- it apparently was imposed by society on everyone. My guess is that this is what public engagements and weddings and all that hoopla -- including the prominence of religion -- are all about: the marrying couple is pledging before everyone -- all of society, and at least all of the family and friends -- to love, honor, and be faithful and not be polygamous and all that good stuff.

Suppose, on the one hand, that monogamy came about because of hostile forces extrinsic to human society (as with people living in the Arctic or the Kalahari Desert) rather than by cultural imposition (as in Europe, apparently -- and for example only -- and societies that have spread from these places). Suppose it was instituted for the same reason that other "democratization" processes have occurred -- and that these reasons are mainly to promote social commitment and reduce desertion and social cheating and shorter-term (termination of) commitments in general, and to disparage male-female opportunity differences as part of societal trends toward equal opportunity for all?

On the other hand, what if there were solid evidence that monogamy has spread primarily through aggressive conquest by peoples that had imposed it on their own societies in the interests of reducing internal conflicts, this in turn in the interests of yielding more unified fighting forces -- especially the absentee kinds of forces involved in exporting war to other societies? Since it is typical for people to think about harms or benefits to "society" (rather than to individuals or particular kinds of individuals) in these questions, what if monogamy were indeed instituted primarily to unify society, and what if societal unity is mainly about competition with other societies, and in the end intergroup competition, aggression, and war? What if war has been promoted by monogamy being promoted? Now how will you develop your ideological or mixed ideological and biological arguments? Would any of this affect how you feel or how you would have answered that original question about the geneticist's speech?