

Sexual Selection in Modern Times

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Throughout recorded time, human interest has consistently been concerned with the basic subjects of religion and science as two means of sustaining and developing civilization (Woodrow, 1884). As people in societies continued to invest their interest and dedication into these separate topics, it was only a matter of time before the two groups would realize how their different interests would impact their beliefs about the origins of life. Although scientific advancements during the eighteenth century led people to begin to question their beliefs about the beginning of life, the prominent religious stance at the time, creationism, kept people from further investigation; however, during the next century, after Charles Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species*, many people soon became interested in evolution and the concept of natural selection, which was used "to explain how evolution can occur and that it must occur" (Woodrow, 1884). Even though the origin-of-life debate continues to remain a controversial topic today, as the evolutionary perspective found a permanent place in science, another one of Darwin's previously published theories, sexual selection, or the "struggle between individuals of one sex... for the possession of the other sex [to produce the healthiest offspring]" (Darwin, 1886, p. 5), has become a popular topic of debate in the scientific community. Many competing theories of mate attraction continue to challenge Darwin's sexual selection theory; however, over the past decade, research has continued to offer evidence supporting the theory, specifically about topics relating to male sexual attraction. Moreover, it is believed that male attraction is largely determined by traits associated with a woman's fertility: specifically health, youth, and beauty.

Throughout recent years, reports have examined male attraction to traits associated with a woman's fertility, and as a result, many have suggested that males are more likely to be attracted to women who exhibit high levels of health. To illustrate, it has been found that men are more likely to be attracted to women who have specific body shapes that appear healthy enough to withstand pregnancy, while they are less likely to be attracted to women who are significantly over or under their ideal weight and do not appear healthy enough to be able to withstand labor. This specific body shape can be quantified by measuring the circumference of a woman's waist and comparing it to the circumference of her hips, and though the range of what is considered to be attractive varies to some extent, Singh (1994) concluded that a majority of the male population believes that women appear healthiest, most fertile, and as a result, most attractive with a waist-to-hip ratio of 0.7. Similarly, a study following a group of Polish women has also supported this finding as results suggested that women with larger breasts, smaller waists, and larger hips reported higher "levels of two reproductive hormones, estradiol and progesterone" (Miller & Kanazawa, 2007). Relating to other aspects of health, it was recently reported that men are more likely to be attracted to females with a flushed complexion, as opposed to females without any color because a "supply of oxygen-rich red blood" signifies health and fertility, while a "rich supply of blue-colored deoxygenated blood in the face" can be an indicator of "a lack of physical exercise, smoking, and old age" (Roan, 2009). Because there are numerous measures of a woman's health, it can be predicted that many different variables could somehow influence fertility and male attraction.

In addition to health, males are more attracted to younger women as youth is also thought to signify fertility. One study suggested that males are highly attracted to females who have a lack of body hair, large eyes, and shiny hair, regardless of age, because all these features signify

good health. Although men are aware of the actual age of such younger women, evolutionary, psychological, and physiological mechanisms are fooled by modern inventions that previously did not exist, allowing a younger appearance (Miller & Kanazawa, 2007). Others hypothesize that males are more drawn to youthful women, not only because they appear to have high fertility, but also because they have an innate natural tendency to protect offspring, and males are attracted to these females who also appear to need this sort of guarding.

Although youth is a large determinant in a woman's attractiveness, it only plays a small role in influencing facial beauty. Until recently, beauty was often thought of as a subjective quality and unable to be defined, but many studies now suggest that males are more attracted to certain females more than others based on their facial symmetry and proportions. Research has shown that males are less attracted to females with facial asymmetry and disproportion because "externally visible features . . . are designed to be bilaterally symmetrical . . . [and] . . . variations from symmetry signify [poorer] genotypic quality" (Buss, 2005, p. 128). Consequently, although males generally want to "leave the most progeny" (Darwin, 1886), compared with other competing males, they will not sacrifice poor quality genetic partners in exchange for sexual selection. For example, although there are many different combinations of asymmetrical face shapes, Hager (2003) describes two specific irregularly-shaped facial profiles that have been found to be not only very unattractive to men, but also correlated with specific health risks. While those with a brachycephalic face shape have a "shorter, concave profile, wider eyes, protruding chin and a small nose . . . [and are also more likely to develop] certain gall bladder problems, . . . [those with a] . . . dolichocephalic [face shape] have "a longer, convex profile, a receding chin, a receding forehead, a larger protruding nose [and are more likely to develop] ulcers" (Hager, 2003). Although these results seem to suggest that health and beauty probably

are almost both dependent on each other when related to attraction, it is still important to view them independently to continue research specifically about male sexual selection and its relationship to fertility.

Since Charles Darwin's first edition of *The Origin of Species* in 1859, much research has been conducted to examine both evolution and sexual selection. Although it appears at the moment that only three female traits (health, beauty, and youth) influence male attraction, the many other habits and lifestyle choices that fall under each of those traits allow for research to expand so as to understand these topics more fully.

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