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Aggression and Violent Behavior



Proximate and ultimate explanations are required for a comprehensive understanding of partner rape

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ABSTRACT

To date, reviews of partner rape have focused on the proximate (or immediate) causes of partner rape. Missing from these reviews, however, is theory and research that has examined the ultimate (or evolutionary) causes of partner rape. Here, we review this literature, and we discuss the complementarity of proximate and ultimate levels of analysis. We conclude by highlighting the importance of integrating multiple levels of analysis when studying men's sexual coercion of their intimate partners.

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The purpose of this article is to persuade readers that ultimate causes often exist alongside proximate causes. In this article, we (1) evaluate the hypothesis that partner rape functions to dominate and control women, arguing that, as an ultimate explanation, this hypothesis is not compatible with modern evolutionary theory, (2) distinguish between proximate and ultimate explanations, (3) review recent theoretical, comparative, and empirical research on the ultimate cause of partner rape, and (4) conclude by noting that proximate and ultimate explanations are often complementary, not opposed.

With recognition that a significant proportion of women is raped by their intimate partners (estimates range between 10% and 26% [Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Hadi, 2000; Painter & Farrington, 1999; Russell, 1982; Watts, Keogh, Ndlovu, & Kwaramba, 1998]), research exploring the causes and consequences of partner rape is beginning to increase. Recently, Martin, Taft, and Resick (2007) provided an extensive review of the marital rape literature (including studies of unmarried cohabitating individuals), and

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discussed three theories of marital rape: feminist theory, social constructionism, and sex-role socialization. These three theories are not mutually exclusive. The following is [Martin et al.'s \(2007\)](#) summary of the theories.

“Feminist scholars believe that marital rape exists as a form of control and dominance over women. Similarly, social constructionists assert that marital rape is a reflection of men's desire to retain traditionally held power in society and to protect themselves and their 'property.' Sex-role socialization theorists believe that marital rape is caused by an adoption of exaggerated traditional sex-role beliefs” (p. 332).

Admirably, [Martin et al. \(2007\)](#) included almost 100 studies in their review of partner rape. Missing from this review, however, was an account of which theory or theories better explain the existing data. Martin et al. are not to blame, however, because these theories are not mutually exclusive. Indeed, due to the substantial overlap between these theories, we have grouped them into one hypothesis, calling it the *domination and control hypothesis* ([Goetz & Shackelford, in press](#)). This hypothesis argues that partner rape is motivated by men's attempts to dominate and control their partners and that this expression of power is the product of men's social roles ([Brownmiller, 1975](#); [Johnson, 1995](#); [MacKinnon, 1987](#); [Millet, 1969](#); [Muehlemhard & Kimes, 1999](#); [Simonson & Subich, 1999](#)). We prefer “hypothesis” to “theory” because a hypothesis is a statement about a relationship between two or more variables, whereas a theory is a set of statements that organize knowledge and explain a large body of facts. Because the issue is the relationship between men's domination and control of their partners and men's rape of their partners, it is best characterized as a hypothesis.

To a large extent, we agree with the domination and control hypothesis. We support the claim that *individual men* may sexually coerce and rape their partners to maintain dominance and control (following [Daly & Wilson, 1988](#)), but we argue against the claim that men are motivated *as a group* to exercise “patriarchal power” or “patriarchal terrorism” over women (as proponents of the domination and control hypothesis often argue, e.g., [Johnson, 1995](#)). A population of men individually attempting to dominate and control their partners might look as if they are motivated as a group to dominate and control women, just as a population of individuals cooperating for themselves might look as if they are cooperating for the group. Population dynamics and evolutionary theory has demonstrated that group behavior is better understood at the individual level ([Nowak, 2006](#); [Williams, 1966](#)). People do not behave in ways to “perpetuate the species,” and there exist no adaptations in any species that benefit the group at the expense of the individual. Moreover, the domination and control hypothesis does not explain why, if men are motivated as a group, only 10% to 26% of women experience rape in their relationship.

In other words, the domination and control hypothesis does not explain why some men rape their partner and why other men do not rape their partner. This hypothesis predicts that all men have an equal probability of raping their partners, which is unlikely from what we know of the psychological literature on sexual offending. There is a large body of evidence that links individual difference characteristics, such as neurodevelopmental incidents, psychopathy, age, and deviant sexual preferences, to various sexual offenses (for a review, see [Lalumière, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005](#)). Although a consequence of these individual differences is the same (i.e., sexual offenses), their causes are different. For example, child molestation is explained by atypical development of the male sexual preference system that results in deviant sexual preferences (e.g., [Camilleri & Quinsey, 2008](#); [Quinsey & Lalumière, 1995](#)), whereas some violent sexual crimes against adult women are explained by psychopathy, a possibly nonpathological suite of personality traits that includes exploitation and sexual coercion as fundamental features (e.g., [Harris, Rice, Hilton, Lalumière, & Quinsey, 2007](#)).

Moreover, we agree that if you ask men and women why men rape their partners, they will often answer that men rape their partners to dominate and control them. Theory and research from the evolutionary sciences and cognitive neuroscience, however, have documented that people are often unaware of the function of their behavior (e.g., [Tooby & Cosmides, 1992](#); [Roser & Gazzaniga, 2004](#)). Ask pregnant women why they find the smell of meat, fish, poultry, and eggs unpleasant during the first trimester, and they will likely be unaware that their nausea and vomiting serve to protect a vulnerable fetus from pathogens (e.g., [Profet, 1992](#)). Ask men why they find women with a low waist-hip ratio to be attractive, and they will likely be unaware that a low waist-to-hip ratio is an indicator of fertility and the availability of neurodevelopmental resources (e.g., [Lassek & Gaulin, 2008](#); [Singh, 1993](#)). Ask men and women why they are not sexually attracted to their siblings, and they will likely be unaware of the survival and reproductive costs associated with deleterious recessive mutations and short-generation pathogens (e.g., [Lieberman, Tooby, & Cosmides, 2007](#)). Psychologists already appreciate that individuals are often unaware of the ultimate functions of their behavior. Readers would be unsatisfied with a study that documented that young men behave aggressively simply because they want to, because this explanation begs the ultimate question of why they should want to and fails to address proximal explanations involving individual differences or environmental causes. Below, we distinguish between the proximate and ultimate levels of explanation in more detail.

1. Proximate and ultimate levels of analysis

Documenting that men behave aggressively because they want to, or more critical to this article, documenting that men rape their partners to dominate and control them offers a proximate explanation. Proximate explanations focus on the immediate causes of a trait, behavior, or mechanism ([Sherman, 1988](#); [Tinbergen, 1963](#)). Proximate explanations answer *how* questions. How do men dominate and control women? Perhaps one way is by raping them. Ultimate explanations, on the other hand, focus on how such a trait or mechanism could have arisen via natural selection. Ultimate explanations are evolutionary explanations; they answer *why* questions related to the evolved function of a trait. Ultimate explanations do not, however, automatically imply that a

trait is an adaptation. Many traits are best understood as byproducts of other adaptations. That is, although some traits have been directly selected due to their associations with survival and reproduction (termed “adaptations”), some traits exist not because they were directly selected but because they were carried along with other traits that were selected (termed “byproducts”). For example, stalking was probably not directly selected for over evolutionary time and might be best characterized as a byproduct. Men might have evolved psychological mechanisms for pursuing potential partners, for persistence, and for acquiring information about potential partners, and therefore a byproduct of these mechanisms might be stalking. Whether a trait or mechanism is an adaptation or a byproduct, both proximate and ultimate explanations are required for a comprehensive understanding, as they are often complementary. Smuts (1995; as quoted in Vandermassen, 2005) highlighted the complementary nature of proximate and ultimate explanations with respect to patriarchy: “Evolutionary theory not only considers *how* men exercise power over women, as feminist theory does, but also investigates the deeper question of *why* males want power over females in the first place, which feminists tend to take as a given” (p. 2, emphasis in original). Below, we discuss recent theoretical, comparative, and empirical research on the ultimate cause of partner rape.

2. Does partner rape have an evolved function?

Why might some men rape or sexually coerce their partner? Could partner rape or sexually coercing a partner be an adaptation or byproduct? One hypothesis advanced by researchers studying sexual coercion from an evolutionary perspective has been called the *sperm competition hypothesis* or the *cuckoldry risk hypothesis*. It states that men's sexual coercion in intimate relationships may function as an anti-cuckoldry tactic, with its occurrence related to a man's suspicions or knowledge of his partner's sexual infidelity (Camilleri, 2004; Goetz & Shackelford, 2006; Lalumière et al., 2005; Thornhill & Thornhill, 1992; Wilson & Daly, 1992).¹ Cuckoldry, the unwitting investment of resources into genetically unrelated offspring, was one of the most serious adaptive problems faced by ancestral men, and is responsible for the evolution of a host anti-cuckoldry tactics (e.g., Platek & Shackelford, 2006). Sexual coercion in response to cues of a partner's sexual infidelity might function to introduce a man's sperm into his partner's reproductive tract at a time when there is a high risk of cuckoldry (i.e., when his partner has recently been inseminated by a rival male). This sperm competition or cuckoldry risk hypothesis was proposed following observations that partner rape in nonhuman species often followed female extra-pair copulations or infidelity (e.g., Barash, 1977; Cheng, Burns, & McKinney, 1983; McKinney, Cheng, & Bruggers, 1984) and that sexual coercion and partner rape in humans often followed accusations of female infidelity (e.g., Finkelhor & Yllo, 1985; Russell, 1982). Wilson and Daly (1992) suggest that “sexual insistence” in the context of a relationship might act as a sperm competition tactic in humans. Thornhill and Thornhill (1992) also hypothesized that partner rape may be an anti-cuckoldry tactic designed over human evolutionary history by selective pressures associated with female infidelity. Thornhill and Thornhill argued that a woman who resists or avoids copulating with her partner might thereby be signaling to him that she has been sexually unfaithful and that partner rape functions to decrease his paternity uncertainty. Similar arguments are presented by Lalumière et al. (2005), who suggest that antisocial men who suspect that their female partner has been sexually unfaithful may be motivated to engage in partner rape.

Direct empirical evidence supporting the sperm competition hypothesis is accumulating. Camilleri (2004), for example, found that risk of a partner's infidelity predicted interest in partner sexual coercion among men but not women. This is important because men, but not women, are at risk of being cuckolded (i.e., ancestral women never faced maternity uncertainty, but ancestral men always had some degree of paternity uncertainty). Goetz and Shackelford (2006) documented that a man's sexual coercion in the context of an intimate relationship was related positively to his partner's infidelities. Men who sexually coerced their partners were more likely to report that they perceived their partners to be unfaithful, and women who reported that their partners sexually coerced them were more likely to report being unfaithful. In a forensic sample, Camilleri and Quinsey (submitted for publication) found that convicted partner rapists, compared to non-sexual partner abusers, experienced more cuckoldry risk events prior to committing their offense; and in a second study involving a community sample, direct and recent cues to female infidelity predicted men's self-reported propensity for sexual coercion. Goetz and Shackelford (in press) collected data on the proximate and ultimate causes of men's sexual coercion in intimate relationships to explore how these variables interact. In two studies involving men's self-reports and women's partner-reports, men's sexual coercion of their partners was consistently predicted by female infidelity even after controlling for men's dominant personalities and men's controlling behavior. Studying men's partner-directed insults, Starratt, Goetz, Shackelford, McKibbin, and Stewart-Williams (in press) found in two studies that a reliable predictor of a man's sexual coercion was their accusations of their partner's sexual infidelity. Men who accused their partners of being unfaithful were more likely to sexually coerce them.

Throughout the current review of an ultimate explanation of partner rape, we purposefully shifted from partner rape to partner sexual coercion. Although sexual coercion in intimate relationships sometimes includes men's use of violent physical force (i.e., partner rape), sexual coercion in intimate relationships often includes more subtle forms of psychological and emotional manipulation (Basile, 1999; Camilleri, Quinsey, & Tapscott, submitted for publication; Johnson & Sigler, 2000; Marshall & Holtzworth-Munroe, 2002; Shackelford & Goetz, 2004). Shackelford and Goetz (2004), for example, found that men were more likely to sexually coerce their partners by hinting about withholding benefits, threatening relationship defection, and manipulating

¹ The articles, chapters, and books originally proposing the sperm competition or cuckoldry risk hypothesis have each been coauthored by women (Margo Wilson, Nancy Thornhill, and Marnie Rice). We mention this to ward off *ad hominem* arguments of misogyny and anti-feminism (for examples of such personal attacks, see Thornhill & Palmer, 2003). Furthermore, it is critical to emphasize that an evolutionary analysis of any trait does not excuse, condone, or justify it. The evolutionary sciences are descriptive, not prescriptive.

their partners by reminding them of their “obligation” to have sex (e.g., “If you love me, you’ll have sex with me”) than they were to use physical force to achieve sexual intercourse. Also, Camilleri et al. (submitted for publication) found that tactics to obtain sex from an intimate partner clustered into two factors—sexual coercion and sexual coaxing. Interest in using sexual coercion was related to past instances of sexual coercion in relationships, psychopathy, and attraction to sexual aggression, whereas interest in using sexual coaxing was related to sexual desire, self-perceived mating success, and sexual signaling, suggesting these tactics have mutually exclusive determinants. By using more subtle forms of sexual coercion (rather than explicit physical force), men may avoid inflicting on their partners some of the costs associated with partner rape, and they may avoid their partners’ defection from the relationship that might occur following the use of physical force to achieve sexual intercourse (Block & DeKeseredy, 2007).

We have hypothesized that ancestral men who sexually coerced their partners when they suspected or had knowledge of their partners’ sexual infidelity would have been able to reduce paternity uncertainty and, thus, would have out-reproduced men who did not. Although more severe forms of sexual coercion might be used when faced with greater resistance, this relationship is not linear because the most severe acts might have carried too many costs (e.g., partner’s defection from the relationship, retaliating kin, injuries that preclude pregnancy), and thus would not be directly selected (e.g. Shields & Shields, 1983). For example, Walker (1997) found that, on average, sexual offending both between and within victims progressed from hands-off actions towards intercourse, but did not continue to severe injury (reported in Lalumière et al., 2005). We therefore expect that the majority of partner rapes do not lead to extensive physical injury (although psychological trauma is likely), and partner rapes that do are committed by men with sexually violent characteristics (e.g., biastophilia or psychopathy).

3. Proximate and ultimate explanations are complementary

The domination and control hypothesis and the sperm competition hypothesis are complementary hypotheses. Researchers interested in proximate explanations would not be surprised to learn that men sexually coerce their partners upon detection or suspicion of their partners’ infidelity. Likewise, researchers interested in ultimate explanations would agree that men who sexually coerce their partners do so to dominate and control them, but these researchers would add that this domination and control functions to limit men’s partners’ sexual autonomy and reduce paternity uncertainty. These two perspectives reflect different levels of analysis. The sperm competition hypothesis is an ultimate or evolutionary explanation, focusing how such psychology and behavior could have arisen via natural selection.

The purpose of this article is not to present all direct and indirect evidence that support the hypothesis that men’s sexual coercion in an intimate relationship might function as an anti-cuckoldry tactic. The purpose of this article instead is to persuade readers that ultimate causes exist alongside proximate causes. Partner rape is an abhorrent yet complex phenomenon. To understand it more fully and perhaps one day reduce the incidence of partner rape and sexual coercion, both proximate and ultimate causes must be considered.

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