IN'S SOCIOBIOLOGY, HON!

Genetic gender determinism in *Cosmopolitan* magazine

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Though the heated scientific debate that sociobiology initially generated has largely subsided, speculation on the genetic basis of social behaviors remains a thriving academic discipline and provides valuable content that can be easily translated into compelling newspaper articles, popular magazines, and self-help mass market paperbacks. In *Cosmopolitan* magazine, statements reflecting the genetic gender-determinism of sociobiology appear in offhand remarks, personal anecdotes, and in lengthy quotations attributed to experts with PhDs. My textual analysis of this sociobiological common sense in *Cosmopolitan* articles from 1995–2005 represents an in-depth case study of the migration of gender-related science to a popular culture venue for women. I examine the sociobiological theory that norms of female attractiveness advertise reproductive capacity, drawing connections between scholarly works, popular self-help literature, and *Cosmopolitan* articles. The magazine invokes sociobiological logic to explain and legitimate the laborious techniques of femininity, positioning the female body as a commodity in the marketplace of evolved male desire and reducing it to the signs—real or cosmetically simulated—that reveal the body’s underlying reproductive value. I also investigate how *Cosmopolitan* uses sociobiological common sense about men to construct, exaggerate, and excuse their bad behavior, requiring women to solve or tolerate it. Sociobiology responds to gender inequalities by offering a seemingly rational scientific model asserting that existing gender norms and differences are natural and inevitable.

KEYWORDS women’s magazines; sociobiology; femininity; media studies; *Cosmopolitan*; gender roles

Introduction

In a *Cosmopolitan*¹ article that advises female readers not to fret over “Weird Habits He Won’t Ever Change” (Gaynor 2003), a photo shows a shirtless chest-waxed male model drinking milk straight out of the carton. The caption asks: “Why didn’t he pour it in a glass? Hon, it’s caveman biology” (Gaynor 2003, p. 134). *Cosmopolitan*, the leading US women’s magazine (“Circulation” 2007), frequently invokes the findings of sociobiology translated into common sense terms. In both its popular and academic forms, sociobiology maintains a model of gender essentialism: men are driven by psychological and physiological urges ingrained in the era of “cavemen” while women’s domestic labor, nurturing behaviors, and
adherence to ideals of white middle-class Western femininity are likewise genetically predetermined.

As an avid waiting-room reader of *Cosmopolitan* and a former subscriber, I became intrigued by the magazine’s many sociobiological statements that contradicted feminist theories of gender as a socially constructed performance. How is it possible that after decades of feminist critique, sociobiology remains a thriving academic discipline and manages to drift into the common sense knowledge of a leading women’s magazine? *Cosmopolitan*’s appeals to sociobiology illustrate the translation of modern theoretical science into practical techniques for everyday life. Tracking this process offers a rhetorical case study of the migration of scientific concepts into popular media and reveals the strategies by which a widely read women’s magazine evades the achievements and ambitions of feminism, invoking a conservative nostalgia for a mythical era of gender role fixity. Adding the perspective of feminist science studies to the complex dialogue between feminism and women’s magazines, I argue that these ongoing conversations need to take the interaction of popular culture and science into account.

Sociobiological studies are frequently reported in the mainstream press and appear in *Cosmopolitan* as early as 1982. Sociobiological theories of gender now exist in popular culture as an insidious common sense subtext, often in articles that are not explicitly about science or sociobiology. Sociobiological statements appear in every issue of today’s *Cosmopolitan*: they occur as offhand remarks, figure in casual or personal anecdotes, and appear in lengthy quotations attributed to an expert with a PhD. In the first section of my analysis, I demonstrate that *Cosmopolitan*’s sociobiology closely parallels academic forms of sociobiology. I do this by systematically tracking the sociobiological theory that norms of female attractiveness advertise reproductive value, drawing connections between scholarly works, popular self-help literature, and *Cosmopolitan* articles. In the second section of my analysis, I investigate how *Cosmopolitan* uses common sense sociobiological knowledge about men to exaggerate and excuse their bad behavior. This research constitutes an in-depth case study of gender-related science as it moves to mass media, and puts feminist science studies in conversation with feminist studies of women’s magazines to argue that feminist science studies could valuable pay greater attention to popular culture. Likewise, I contend that feminist science studies could extend its analysis beyond expert knowledge production and beyond the mass media representations of scientific research to usefully illuminate how scientific discourses migrate to mass media and become represented and understood as common sense techniques of femininity.

Women’s magazines tend to prioritize women’s issues and promote women’s personal and sexual agency (Machin & Thornborrow 2003; McRobbie 1991, 1999), but some researchers interpret these messages as individualized, male-centric, consumer-oriented, anti-feminist, and express concern over their narrow range of ideological subject positions (Ballaster, Beetham, Frazer & Hebron 1991; Farvid & Braun 2006; Krassas, Blauwvamp & Wesselink 2001; McCracken 1993; McMahon 1990; Ouellette 1999; Winship 1987). Others argue that individual readers often resist the dominant messages of women’s magazines and instead produce complex interpretations informed by their social context and personal experience (Ballaster et al. 1991; Currie 1999; Frazer 1987; Hermes 1995). Earlier feminist critiques tend to offer a more generalized indictment of femininity, viewing it as an oppressive model for behavior imposed equally on all women readers, specifically, as a patriarchal “cult” (Ferguson 1983), as a homogenizing ideal that is promoted for all women (Ballaster et al. 1991), and as inseparable from consumerism (McMahon 1990).
Some feminist criticism investigates femininity’s multiple roles and functions, providing a more nuanced analysis of women’s divergent experiences of femininity. For example, McRobbie (1999) provides an ironic interpretation of femininity in teen magazines while other scholars view femininity as part of a fantasy world (Machin & Thornborrow 2003). This extensive range of research provides evidence that the variety of content in an array of women’s magazines is non-linear, fragmented, internally contradictory, and offers many perspectives for understanding and negotiating gender and femininity.

Building on this diverse research, I choose to focus on one specific perspective on gender that appears in *Cosmopolitan*—sociobiological discourses—to argue that the use of scientific common sense consistently offers anti-feminist justifications for the practices and techniques of normative femininity. My analysis shows that *Cosmopolitan* provides readers with a faithful, unironic reproduction of sociobiology as uncontroversial scientific fact. As such, the magazine lends legitimacy to white middle-class Western practices of femininity, suggesting that they are fixed in nature. In so doing, *Cosmopolitan* validates certain emotional techniques that maintain traditional gender roles by advising women to accept men’s overstated bad behaviors as genetically predetermined.

**Methodology**

I use textual analysis to examine the connections between *Cosmopolitan*’s sociobiological discourses and the popular press and academic versions of this scientific discipline. While textual analysis of mass media does not seek to determine how real, empirical readers understand or interpret media content, it is a valuable method for investigating what knowledge mass media position as neutral, consensus facts—what constitutes “mainstream” or “boilerplate” discourse (Treichler 1999), unmarked by caveats and legitimated by rhetorics of journalistic objectivity and rational thought. In this study, I investigate how discourses of sociobiology are positioned in *Cosmopolitan* as taken-for-granted knowledge and how they produce scientific theories and ideas as common sense. I do not argue that this common sense, especially in this particular instructional form in a women’s magazine, imposes a hegemonic model of gender, but that it reiterates a practical set of feminine techniques for self-government, self-help, and self-knowledge (Ouellette & Hay 2008) that are powerfully legitimated by the authority of science.

When did sociobiological discourses first begin to appear as common sense in *Cosmopolitan*? To find out, I reviewed the magazine from 1965 to the present (2007), randomly selecting one issue from each year and evaluating all the full-length articles that purported to explain men’s behavior or offered advice about male–female relationships. I paid particular attention to articles reporting on new sociobiological studies and to two types of statements I consider sociobiological common sense: (1) casual unattributed sociobiological statements, such as, “it’s caveman biology”; and (2) quotations from sociobiologists that are presented as uncontroversial and are fully integrated in articles alongside other forms of expert and anecdotal knowledge. I classified these articles by the type of explanation or understanding on which they relied: were men’s behavior and relationship problems explained by appeals to sociobiological concepts or did they use other sources of knowledge about men? I also classified content according to whether it was attributed to a source or not, and if so, according to whether the source was an expert and from what field.
This review revealed that sociobiology emerges as a common sense explanatory framework in *Cosmopolitan* in the early 1990s and persists to the present. A variety of explanations for men’s behavior appear regularly in *Cosmopolitan* since 1965; sources of knowledge range from informal speculations and personal anecdotes to empirical findings and expert commentaries—typically these sources of authority are psychologists, psychiatrists, sex therapists, sociologists, and psychoanalysts. But beginning in the early 1990s, these experts, already appearing in some form in virtually every article, are joined by scholars offering sociobiological insights in at least a few articles in any given issue.

I then used the ProQuest database to gather almost 200 articles with sociobiological statements by searching the entire full-text archives available at the time of research: articles published between 1995 and 2005. To obtain these articles, I searched the database for the following list of keywords: gene, genetic, evolution, ancient, hardwired, innate, instinct, urges, caveman, primal, biology, anthropology, zoology, hunt, gather, and their grammatical variations. After reviewing all the articles generated by this search, I chose representative examples of sociobiological common sense from almost two dozen articles for the textual analysis that follows. Although this selective sample does not allow me to determine how prevalent sociobiology is in relation to other frameworks of gender and femininity in *Cosmopolitan*, it is well suited to the investigation of sociobiology’s deployment as common sense knowledge in a mass market magazine from the mid-1990s to the present.

### Sociobiology and its Discontents

Eugenics and scientific racism were dominant modes of explaining human social differences from the mid-nineteenth century until the early twentieth century in the US, when progressives and behaviorists largely replaced biological explanations of social conditions with environmental and culture-based theories. Biology then gradually returned in the 1970s as a dominant explanatory framework for some social issues in the US with the development of the discipline of sociobiology, which posits that human and animal social behaviors are largely written in their genetic codes. Sociobiology became a major area of academic inquiry in 1975 with the publication of Wilson’s influential textbook *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis*, which explains such behaviors as aggression, nurturance, and altruism with evolutionary mechanisms. Wilson, a Harvard professor of zoology at the time, focuses mainly on animals, as had earlier researchers, but his chapter on humans, “Man: From Sociobiology to Sociology,” argues that a main task of sociobiology is to “monitor the genetic basis of social behavior” (1975, p. 575). In both its popular and academic articulations, sociobiology argues that the current social order reflects ingrained psychological mechanisms and that changes to this natural order may cause significant long-term damage to the species. Wilson explains in his 1978 Pulitzer-prize-winning book *On Human Nature*: “Human emotional responses and the more general ethical practices based on them have been programmed to a substantial degree by natural selection” (p. 6). While new evolutionary theories of animal behavior rarely draw much public notice or scientific debate, sociobiology’s claims about human behavior and the organization of society have produced a substantial amount of interest and challenge.

Long-time opponents of sociobiology, evolutionary biologists Gould (1981) and Lewontin (1991) contend that sociobiology is biologically determinist, ethnocentric, and universalizing, and they stress that it greatly oversimplifies the role of individual genes.
Sociobiology even breaks the standard rules of science since its studies are tautological “just-so stories” with hypotheses that are not verifiable or falsifiable: even the most sophisticated scholarship is never able to offer more than speculation that a trait’s prevalence in a population is due largely to genetics and not to any other shared factor such as culture or environment (Gould 1981; Harris 1979; Sahlins 1976). Adding superfluous evolutionary causality to social behavior that is readily explainable by material conditions (Harris 1979), sociobiology abstracts human behavior from context and culture, creating a “[meaningless] naked human essence” (Fausto-Sterling 1985, p. 199). Currently, sociobiological research, sometimes called “evolutionary psychology,” is practiced by anthropologists, psychologists, cognitive scientists, and geneticists, and is reproduced in the mainstream press as well as in best-selling books aimed at a general audience.

Feminist science studies scholars have joined in this incisive empirical critique of sociobiological research, and in particular highlight the ideological implications of explaining everything from gender roles to rape with reference to apparently innate and fixed evolutionary urges (Birke 1986; Bleier 1988; Fausto-Sterling 1985, 1997; Haraway 1988, 1991, 1997; Reed 1978). Sociobiology is perhaps the most successful brand of scientific research and popular psychology contributing to the backlash against feminism (Faludi 1991), and provides a powerful biological argument against the changes in gender roles and entrenched inequalities that feminism had been stridently demanding when sociobiology gained momentum in the late 1970s and 1980s. Sociobiology provides a scientific rationalization for gender, race, and class stratification by constructing a fixed human nature that transcends environment and context.

Sociobiology also naturalizes capitalism, positing that human nature is a direct product of “selfish genes” striving to maximize their reproductive profit, and the most natural economic system should reflect this model. Wilson’s fears that a “planned society,” which is presumably the authoritarian socialist opposite of free market capitalism, would be so unnatural that it would “rob man of his humanity” (1975, p. 575). According to the logic of sociobiology, since competitive genes determine every behavior, we can only be naturally human in a competitive economic system. Sahlins explains, “We seem to have been caught up in [a] vicious cycle, alternately applying the model of capitalist society to the animal kingdom, then reapplying this bourgeoisified animal kingdom to the interpretation of human society” (1976, p. 101). These scholars argue that sociobiology is particularly insidious in its legitimation of patriarchy and capitalism under the guise of objective science, and I extend their findings to investigate how these scientific ideas are translated into practical advice and techniques of femininity in a women’s magazine.

**Cosmopolitan and Sociobiology**

Communications and rhetorical studies on media representations of science find that scientific information is often distorted and exaggerated in the mainstream press (Bubela & Caulfield 2004; Fahnestock 1986; Wilcox 2003), and that scientific discourses in mass media can be part of a larger system of anti-feminist ideas about gender (Marchessault & Sawchuk 2000; Nelkin 1987; Nelkin & Lindee 1995; Terry & Urla 1995; Treichler 1999). The sociobiological concepts that appear in *Cosmopolitan*, mostly dealing with female attractiveness and gender difference, are generally represented accurately, except that *Cosmopolitan* rarely reproduces the discussions in academic work about confounding variables or alternative explanations. Additionally, the magazine’s articles are typically more
genetically determinist than more cautiously worded academic papers. The magazine also frames sociobiology explicitly in terms of self-improvement, which is frequently the focus of popular books written by academics and psychologists, but is rarely the framework for scientific work. Women’s magazines have close ties with publishing, marketing, and public relations industries, and as such, rather than drawing directly from the academic literature, Cosmopolitan articles tend to quote experts who have already translated sociobiology from scientific language to more popular forms, often listing the expert’s PhD credentials, their institutional affiliation, and the title of their latest mass market self-help book.

Since sociobiology’s inception in 1975, biologically deterministic explanations of social problems have gradually gained renewed prominence in popular culture (Conrad 1997; Nelkin 1987; Nelkin & Lindee 1995; Wilcox 2003). Nelkin and Lindee (1995) provide a wide-ranging analysis of vernacular “gene-talk” in popular culture and locate the beginning of sociobiology as common sense in mainstream media in the late 1980s. Nelkin explains that unlike most other forms of scientific research, “the press has typically discussed the arguments for sociobiology and the details of particular studies in uncritical, often enthusiastic, terms” (1987, p. 28). In Cosmopolitan, reports on sociobiological research appear from the late 1980s to the mid 1990s, and one article that offers an uncritical review of sociobiological studies of gender differences appears as early as 1982. It asks, “Is anatomy destiny?” and its sub-headline responds to the question: “Authorities now say nature, not nurture, makes him thump and thunder while you rescue lost kittens and primp” (Hackler 1982). Later examples include a 1990 Cosmopolitan article by feminist psychologist and popular author Tavris, who asks, “The nature-nurture question: Will it ever be answered?” and offers a fairly measured review of theories about the genetic basis of personality.

I turn now to my analysis of how common sense sociobiology is casually deployed as uncontroversial information in articles focused on topics other than scientific research, such as male behavior, relationships, and beauty.

**Fertility is Sexy**

Today’s Cosmopolitan uses sociobiological common sense to provide a natural underlying logic for the practices of femininity. This evolutionary explanation for femininity is directly culled from the sociobiological literature and dates back at least to Wilson’s 1975 comments on attraction in Sociobiology: The New Synthesis: “The traits of physical attraction are . . . fixed in nature. They include . . . the protuberant breasts and buttocks of women” (1975, p. 548). According to sexual selection theory, males who are attracted to fertile females are genetically rewarded with numerous healthy offspring, so evolution selects for a male psychological mechanism of attraction to signs of female fertility.

In an early book on sexual selection from a sociobiological perspective, Symons explains, “Once males were no longer able to detect ovulation by smell, selection would have favored males who were able to discriminate and to be sexually aroused by other indices of female reproductive value, an assessment males almost certainly made visually” (1979, p. 138). Buss, a contemporary widely published sociobiologist, has written extensively on sexual selection, finding, for example, that heterosexual men across a few dozen societies consistently prefer younger women as partners. After establishing male preference for signs of youth as nearly universal, Buss concludes, “Contemporary men
prefer young women because they have inherited from their male ancestors a preference that focused intently upon this cue to a woman's reproductive value" (1994, p. 52).

Sociobiology ignores the possibility that a male preference for youth in females could be non-genetic, for example, as a result of explicit knowledge of the biological fact that women have a limited number of childbearing years beginning earlier in life, or an implicit version of this knowledge reproduced through shared cultural norms valuing female youth. Instead, sociobiology insists that the only explanation for the near-universal male desire for female youth could be a specific evolved unconscious psychological mechanism encoded in the DNA of all males. Needless to say, this hypothetical female-youth-preference gene has not yet been identified.

In some articles on beauty or male behavior, *Cosmopolitan* draws on sociobiological experts to establish that specific beauty norms reflect the subconscious male desire for fertility, which is rigidly encoded in the genetic code of all men:

Some experts argue that males may be hardwired to prefer megasize melons. “Millions of years ago, as humans were evolving, a woman’s breasts signaled many things to a man,” explains Helen Fisher, Ph.D., anthropologist and author of *The First Sex* (Random House, 1999). “They indicated that a female was of reproductive age, she was healthy, and she was probably capable of providing milk for her young.” (Kristen Kemp 1999, p. 188)

This statement biologizes Western cultural norms as well as heterosexuality, positioning the female body as a commodity in the marketplace of evolved male desire and reducing it to the signs that reveal the body’s underlying reproductive value. Sociobiology offers a version of femininity that completely disavows the historical and cultural specificity of beauty and puts women in an inflexible system in which they are required to decode male heterosexual desire and alter their appearance accordingly:

A study of men across 190 societies by anthropologist Clellan Ford and psychologist Frank Beach found that—regardless of individual or cultural preferences—they are all drawn to women whose looks connote youth, health, and energy. The totally primal explanation: “Those traits send the message that a woman is fertile and will bear healthy children,” says Desmond Morris, Ph.D., adviser to the Social Issues Research Centre in Oxford, England, and author of *The Human Sexes: A Natural History of Man and Woman*. The reasons behind this attraction may date back to caveman days, but you can still capitalize on it to draw modern guys to your side. (“What Men Find Sexiest” 2002, p. 241)

In both the popular *Cosmopolitan* version of sociobiology and in the academic discipline, femininity is explained as an evolutionary by-product of men’s sexual choices. Buss explains, “Men’s preference for physically attractive mates [has led to a] species-wide psychological mechanism that transcends culture” (1994, p. 58). Within the framework of sociobiology, there is typically little or no attention paid to women’s choice of sexual partners, as in one study in which the experimenters confess in a footnote: “We pay little attention to female choice, even though its existence is apparent” (Jones, Blurton, Marlowe, Hawkes & O’Connell 2000, p. 84). Its existence may be apparent, but it is clearly uninteresting, because according to sociobiology, only men’s mating choices determine the norms of femininity—not culture, not mass media, and certainly not women themselves who choose daily how or whether to perform any specific version of femininity.
Femininity is Natural, But it Takes a Lot of Work

Cosmopolitan’s sociobiological statements rely on the rhetoric of health and fertility to explain that desire for feminine beauty resides permanently in men’s psyche, providing a veneer of scientific authority and justification for the laborious process of replicating white middle-class Western beauty ideals. As Cosmopolitan explains:

Studies show that all men are biologically hardwired to be attracted to a woman possessing a particular set of physical assets. And what’s nice: The items on the “she’s hot” checklist are ones that any chick can attain... or at least do a fab job of faking. (“What Men Find Sexiest” 2002, p. 241)

Cosmopolitan uses sociobiological statements to encourage the reader to figure out what men naturally and universally find attractive and to create a simulated natural version of herself for male consumption.

While wearing makeup is a historical, cultural, and class-variable practice of femininity (Peiss 1998), Cosmopolitan deploys sociobiology to authorize the cosmetic trends of the moment. The experts in this passage universalize both lipstick in general and the latest shades:

“Full lips signal youth and health—two signs of fertility that men are innately attracted to,” says David Buss, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and author of The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating. Then there’s the interesting anthropological theory that our lips have come to represent, well, their downtown counterparts: “A swollen-looking, pouty mouth mimics engorged (i.e., sexually aroused) labia,” explains Meredith Small, Ph.D., professor of anthropology at Cornell University...

“So a red, pink, or plum shade that makes your lips look very flushed is attractive to men,” says Small. (“Lips No Man Can Resist” 2003, p. 260)

While one year the right lipstick shade apparently taps into men’s ingrained vulval flushing associations, the next year light sparkly shades make lips appear fuller and more indicative of fertility. Each new beauty tip erases the one before it with a sociobiological justification for its ultimate naturalness. Though beauty trends fluctuate, Cosmopolitan provides the same rationale for each: this technique or product helps you successfully create a natural feminine appearance. With the aid of the scientific rationale of sociobiology, Cosmopolitan offers the techniques for simulating natural beauty, reinforcing the need to purchase the magazine and to learn which products to buy, meanwhile creating advertiser-friendly content targeted to a specific demographic group.

Sociobiology Prefers Blondes

Sociobiology is employed in Cosmopolitan to justify white feminine beauty standards as the norm for all women. Blonde hair is valued because it apparently represents youth and health and thus is naturally more attractive to men, obliterating social hierarchies of race that might contribute to this preference:

“Light-colored hair is often taken as a signal of youthfulness,” [Helen] Fisher explains… Girls have blond hair that eventually darkens. So if a woman still has her blond locks, men might see her as younger, healthier, more fertile, and therefore more desirable than her brunette counterpart. (Kristen Kemp 1999, p. 188)
The universal equation of blonde hair with youthfulness indicates *Cosmopolitan’s* general position of normative whiteness, tempered only by the magazine’s token attempts to include some models of color. Popular and academic sociobiology typically operate in frameworks of unquestioned whiteness, as demonstrated by this comment in a peer-reviewed journal article in which sociobiologist Barber explains, “In our culture, flaxen hair fits in with a stereotype of childish cuteness while blonde hair is associated with sexual attractiveness, particularly for women” (1995, pp. 414–415; emphasis mine). Writing at a university in Alabama, Barber presumably does not consider the many women of color who rarely have naturally blonde hair to be a part of what he refers to as “our culture.” Popular author and psychiatrist Allan Pease similarly takes a white ethnocentric position when he comments that blonde hair and small noses are “universally attractive” (Pease & Pease 2004, p. 210).

While *Cosmopolitan’s* sociobiological discourses of beauty value whiteness by referencing the natural attractiveness of blonde hair, some sociobiologists explicitly argue that male preference for female pale skin is an evolved psychological mechanism. A 1986 sociobiological study of skin color preference found that in a majority of fifty societies men preferred females with lighter skin (van den Berghe & Frost 1986), and by sociobiological logic, any attitude or behavior that is common to many cultures requires a biological explanation: “Skin color preferences are close enough to a cultural universal to demand a general [evolutionary] explanation” (Jones 1998, p. 102). These scholars reason that since “young women are relatively light-skinned, but grow darker with increasing age” and since “female skin color changes slightly during the menstrual cycle, being lightest at ovulation” (Jones 1998, p. 102), then male preference for lighter skin must be an evolved fertility-seeking psychological mechanism. Another sociobiologist explains, “Women with paler skin are, in effect, advertising youthfulness” (Barber 1995, p. 415).

Sociobiologist Jones dismisses the common argument that preference for white skin is tied to colonialism, contending that this argument “does not stand up to historical scrutiny,” since at certain times Anglo-Saxons were not the dominant group, but their skin color was still favored (1998, p. 101). These claims elide the US’s particular history of racial oppression and continuing structural inequalities, as well as the racial dimensions of European and American imperialism. By this unverifiable sociobiological reasoning—the only “proof” is prevalence in the population—political systems and social context are irrelevant, and the only possible explanation for the connection between whiteness and normative femininity could be that it advertises value in the reproductive market.

You Can’t Change the System, So You’d Better Learn How to Apply Mascara

Sociobiology-based self-help books focus on teaching readers techniques to maximize their gains in the evolutionary marketplace. Buss’s popular book, subtitled *Strategies of Human Mating,* instructs people to take advantage of the fact that our psychology is “designed to deal with critical cues from an ancestral world but . . . continues to operate with tremendous force in today’s modern world of mating” (1994, p. 71). Popular author Allan Pease takes the same perspective, and offers a quiz in his book for women to determine if they are maximizing their attractiveness. To those who score low by choosing such options as, my hair is “short,” the shoes in my closet are “low heels or flat shoes,” my eyes are “smaller/narrow,” or my nose is “larger” (Pease & Pease 2004, pp. 179–182),
he offers the advice, “Men can’t help being attracted to the obvious feminine signals. Why not work with this—however much you may dislike it—to improve your appearance, and end up with a greater range of men to choose from?” (Pease & Pease 2004, p. 185). Barber similarly advises, as a side note in a journal article on sexual selection and attractiveness, “When adult women attempt to enhance their appearance, they should . . . create an artificial impression of youthfulness” (1995, p. 414). Buss explicitly dismisses all non-evolutionary explanations for what men find attractive. He argues, “men worldwide want physically attractive, young, and sexually loyal wives . . . These preferences cannot be attributed to Western culture, to capitalism, to white Anglo-Saxon bigotry, to the media, or to incessant brainwashing by advertisers” (Buss 1994, p. 70). Sociobiology insists that the profound historical and cultural differences in the performative and laborious practices of femininity are mere surface variations on the unchangeable rules of biology.

*Cosmopolitan* employs sociobiology to bypass feminist critiques of beauty standards, characterizing challenges to gender norms as at best irrelevant and at worst damaging to women. *Cosmopolitan* writer Karen Lehrman explains:

> Considering [the] biological drive [to value beauty], cosmetics and fashion should be viewed as tools of female enhancement, not of an evil patriarchy. They also happen to be fun. Damning beauty in the name of feminism leaves women with a dilemma: They can either refrain from all traditionally feminine practices, like using makeup and coloring their hair, and therefore sacrifice their looks for the sake of a misguided principle; or they can use the tools of beauty to their advantage, only to be told they are powerless victims of male oppression. (1997, p. 62)

While Lehrman’s comments malign feminism for failing to account for women’s choices and experiences, sociobiology removes women entirely from its understanding of feminine norms, positing instead that white middle-class femininity is the natural and inevitable result of evolved male psychological mechanisms. Karen Lehrman insists on the ultimate naturalness of the Western construction of femininity:

> Old-school feminists typically blame a misogynistic culture, claiming that beauty matters more for women because society says it should . . . Female beauty is valued and desired, but society—ours or any other—didn’t force people to think this way . . . The real culprit is evolution. (1997, p. 62)

In this passage, Lehrman explicitly articulates the tenet that runs through all of *Cosmopolitan*’s off-hand sociobiological statements, that conventional femininity is rooted in fixed universal biological facts that women must embrace or ignore at their peril.

*Caveman Masculinity*

In *Cosmopolitan*, a variety of expert and anecdotal evidence constructs a homogeneous masculinity that is thoroughly perplexing and essentially inferior to femininity. Sociobiological experts appear in articles explaining that women are naturally compelled to attempt to impose order, control, and domesticity on men, who are naturally predisposed, because of their “primal urges,” to resist it. In Sahlins’s critique of sociobiology, he notes, “We are the only society on earth that thinks of itself as having risen from savagery, identified with a ruthless nature. Everyone else believes they are descended from gods . . . we make both a folklore and a science of our brutish origins” (1976, p. 100).
In *Cosmopolitan*, casual references to men as cavemen encode this narrative of progress. Phrases such as: “Maintaining a certain degree of machismo is a caveman instinct guys just can’t deny” (Bello 2000, p. 84), “We are competitive to our caveman core” (Walters 1999, p. 48), and “It was a] primal flashback to his caveman ancestry” (Davis 1998, p. 206) are commonplace in the magazine. *Cosmopolitan*’s sociobiological statements about men set up a perpetual struggle in which women’s genetically predetermined desire to domesticate men is constantly at odds with men’s supposedly primal aversion to household labor and lack of emotional intelligence.

While men are playfully degraded in the magazine’s endless analysis and exposition of all their strange habits (Ballaster et al. 1991), the logic of sociobiology explains that the problems men cause require women to solve or tolerate them. Sociobiology provides scientific authority for the individualist self-help rhetoric that women need to take responsibility for themselves, since neither feminism nor social programs will be able to address gender inequalities. Instead, readers must control their emotional responses and learn how to accept bad masculine behaviors because they are natural and genetically fixed:

> We’ve investigated the source of some of the perplexing stunts men pull and discovered that much of it boils down to biology. “Misunderstandings often occur because men and women have small but important differences in brain structure and chemistry,” explains anthropologist Helen Fisher, PhD, author of *Why We Love* . . . Look, the dude’s not going to change his weirdo ways, but at least now you have a clue. (Sara Bodnar 2004, p. B22)

Despite superficial disgust or annoyance with male habits, *Cosmopolitan*’s sociobiological model of gender advises readers to forgive men on the grounds that their flaws are genetically fixed and thus inevitable. Sociobiological statements are used to explain that the tendency for men to be messy is deeply ingrained in their psyche:

> “Leaving a trail is a primitive way for guys to mark their territory, like when they don’t put used condoms in the trash but leave them by the bed instead,” says Debra Mandel, Ph.D., a psychologist in Los Angeles. “It goes back to the days when men needed to spread their seed.” (Julia Gaynor 2003, p. 134)

In the framework of sociobiology, women are also biologically better suited to cleaning, and must instruct men in the practices of domesticity: “Women have more rods in their eyes, which allows them to spot particles like dust and crumbs more easily. If you want a guy to get down to the nitty-gritty, ‘appeal to his goal-oriented nature and give him specific tasks,’ suggests Carter” (Bodnar 2004, p. B22). The common sense reasoning of sociobiology dictates that women are required to tolerate men’s biologically intrinsic messiness and teach them how to occasionally contribute to the essentially feminine project of domestic labor.

After decades of articles in *Cosmopolitan* about communication problems in interpersonal relationships that rely on personal anecdotes or the expert advice of psychologists, sociobiological explanations for uncommunicative men begin to appear in the mid-1990s. Sociobiological common sense establishes that interpersonal relationship problems are women’s work to negotiate and resolve: “While you may love to sit around and gab with your girlfriends, guys aren’t hardwired that way. So if he seems quiet or isn’t as communicative as you are, don’t assume he’s annoyed” (Levin & Stephens 2000, p. 194). Men’s poor communication skills are restated endlessly in *Cosmopolitan* and justified as part
of their innate nature: “In cavemen days, we men had to keep quiet all the time while stalking those pesky woolly mammoths. For the most part, that behavior is hard to shake even thousands of years later. We’re stuck with it. It’s in our genes” (Gutfeld 1997, p. 140). The universalizing reasoning of common sense sociobiology obliterates the influence of culture on gender norms while it releases men from any obligation to work on communicating in interpersonal relationships.

The shortcomings of men that *Cosmopolitan* constructs, naturalizes, and justifies, are all in the domain of interpersonal relationships. While the magazine acknowledges these as unfortunate traits of masculinity, sociobiological logic maintains women’s subordination in their need to accept men’s bad behavior as natural and inevitable. If a relationship lacks romance, a woman should accept it: “Men aren’t programmed to be romantic, so lay off the sap” (O’Rourke 2003, p. 192). If a man ogles other women, his girlfriend should tolerate it on the grounds that there is a biological explanation for men’s tendency to objectify women:

> We can’t help it, blame it on DNA, testosterone, or the evolutionary years spent hunting for the perfect female to perpetuate the species, but I can no more blow off a pair of miniskirted legs than I can ignore my arm catching on fire... It’s just a reflex, like when the doctor taps that spot on your knee and your leg kicks out. (James Ellsworth 1998, p. 160)

If a man stares at women, it is because of his brain structure and poor eyesight, which places women, again, as superior to men yet responsible for tolerating their sexist or undesired behavior:

> “Men’s brains are organized to be on the lookout for women who display high signs of health for reproduction (bada bing—the ample-breasts fixation),”... explains Allan Pease, coauthor of *Why Men Don’t Have a Clue and Women Always Need More Shoes*... “Men have worse peripheral vision than women,” says Pease. “Their eyes were designed for hunting, to focus in on their prey, so they’re not subtle when it comes to looking at things that aren’t right in front of them.” (Julia Gaynor 2003, p. 134)

If men make sexist comments, they should be forgiven since they are an innate male impulse: “His catcalls at the boob tube are just a reflex,” explains Alon Gratch, Ph.D., author of *If Men Could Talk*. “He’s hardwired to respond to visual sexual stimuli” (Goins 2002, p. 172). Even rape, which is apparently a manifestation of reproductive desire instead of power dynamics, can be explained, if not forgiven, by sociobiology: “One controversial theory even suggests that rapists attack girls shortly after they’ve hit puberty because of an evolutionary drive to reproduce” (Welch 2002, p. 143). Each of these casual sociobiological explanations for men’s bad behavior degrades and homogenizes men while obscuring the larger underlying structures of inequality that these purportedly natural and universal behaviors reinforce.

**Sociobiology Makes Change Impossible**

In constructing and explaining essentialized tropes of male bad behavior, the common sense of *Cosmopolitan*’s sociobiological narratives maintains a fixed and natural model of gender roles that is incapable of change. This insistence on the inevitability of traditional gender roles is a central tenet in sociobiological literature, as demonstrated by popular author and zoologist Morris’s explanation: “The system was obviously designed to
work in a situation where the female is producing a large family . . . and the male is off hunting with other males” (1967, p. 91). Morris argues, “[M]an’s old impulses have been with him for millions of years . . . [and] there is no hope of shrugging off the accumulated legacy of his whole evolutionary past” (1967, p. 9). Wilson shares Morris’s view, as he explains in On Human Nature: “Human nature is stubborn and cannot be forced without a cost” (1978, p. 147). Likewise, one male writer in Cosmopolitan laments that our departure from biologically prescribed roles has led to dissatisfaction and confusion:

Moving that far from the guidelines of the primal urge has created unreal expectations in more ways than one . . . [Women] want to feel protected and independent simultaneously; they want macho without brutish . . . the once-straightforward mating game is now a complete muddle. (Robert Scheer 1997, p. 168)

And since relationships are women’s work, it is up to them to figure out how to solve the problems that feminism has caused in their relationships with men:

“Historically, men are used to being the center of the universe,” explains Susan A. Basow, PhD, a professor of psychology and gender specialist at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania. “However, with women now showing off their strengths and traditional gender roles changing dramatically, guys are in a quandary about what part they’re supposed to play as boyfriends.” And it’s not just your ballsy, self-assured behavior that he’s reacting to. Everywhere he turns he sees classic male roles under assault. (Michele Bender 2004, p. 166)

Since men are “used to” being in charge, as the previous passage suggests, it is women’s work to patiently tolerate men’s mistakes or bad behaviors. The only solution for the Cosmo girl is to learn to accept the naturalized flaws of masculinity. This sociobiological common sense serves to support the argument that traditional gender roles are fixed and permanent, and that feminism’s efforts to effect change only harm women—and potentially civilization—by causing disruption and uncertainty.

**Conclusion**

The discourses of sociobiological common sense in Cosmopolitan maintain a decidedly hostile relationship to feminism, upholding gender essentialism and a fundamental subordination of women to men. In contemporary Cosmopolitan, sociobiology is often positioned as uncontroversial scientific truth, and is used to construct an inflexible genetically encoded gender binary that justifies (1) the standards of conventional beauty and femininity and (2) the need for women to do domestic work and to tolerate men’s bad behavior.

Sociobiologists insist that their work is vital to uncovering the essence of human nature—a nature that they frequently find is perfectly suited to Western capitalism, racism, and patriarchy—and they explicitly warn that deviations from this natural state presents serious risks and dangers. The popular version of sociobiology provides satisfying “just-so” explanations for gender differences, generating dozens of self-help manuals and showing up frequently in mainstream newspapers. While biologically essentialist explanations of race have been largely unpopular since the early twentieth century and such genetically determinist notions of social class are now relatively rare in mainstream media, there is little recognition that gender might be a similarly socially constructed category of identity and social stratification. While for many women embracing norms of femininity may be an
important survival tactic and/or source of pleasure, the sociobiological justifications for the necessity of practicing these techniques are disturbingly anti-feminist. The scientific authority attached to sociobiological discourses about gender in *Cosmopolitan* does not offer an ironic or playful version of femininity, but legitimates the taken-for-granted logic of culture in which gender is still a fixed social position that comes with a set of traits and characteristics that are genetically predetermined.

When feminism places women’s issues and debates about gender roles on the agenda, sociobiology responds by offering a scientific model that asserts that gender differences—and inequalities—are natural and inevitable. Though sociobiological discourses in *Cosmopolitan* stress the work, planning, and consumer goods it takes to perform femininity, they present these laborious techniques of femininity as strictly adhering to a biologically predetermined set of natural and ultimately unchangeable rules of gender. *Cosmopolitan*’s sociobiological discourses insist on a self-help rhetoric that encourages women to solve their own problems with little help from state resources or even other women, reminding women that the social system they live in is inescapable, that they had best make the most of it, and that *Cosmopolitan* can tell them how.

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**NOTES**

1. I refer to the US edition as simply *Cosmopolitan*.
2. In 1965 Brown was appointed editor and began to remake *Cosmopolitan* in the image of her 1962 book, shifting the magazine from family oriented to its current focus on sex, relationships, and beauty.
3. McMahon observes in her study of *Cosmopolitan* articles from 1976 to 1988 that articles often take on a tone of pseudoscientific objectivity, and sometimes reference a “credentialed person or scientific study” (1990, p. 389).
4. To develop this list, I read through several issues of *Cosmopolitan*, made note of the words and phrases used in sociobiological statements, and added other words that appeared during my analysis. This technique limits the articles to those containing my keywords, as well to the articles that were uploaded into the database.
5. Scholarship on evolutionary biology by William Hamilton in the 1960s and Robert Trivers in the early 1970s were antecedents of sociobiology.
6. Other research-focused articles include Segell’s examinations of recent sociobiological studies in three separate issues of *Cosmopolitan* in 1993: “DNA may spell divorce,” “A Gay Gene,” and “Lesbianism—In the Genes.”
7. The *Cosmopolitan* article does not mention that this study was originally published in 1951.
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