Book Reviews

The Science of Romance: Secrets of the Sexual Brain.

Reviewed by Amy D. Lykins, B.A. and Marta Meana, Ph.D.¹

Evolutionary psychology tells a good story. And it tells a particularly good story about love and sex. This makes it the perfect focus of a book hoping to squeeze into the constricted space wherein popular and scholarly interest about a scientific topic overlap. Barber’s volume pretty much pulls it off, although not without some compromises. Interestingly, the greatest one of these could potentially alienate both audiences for very different reasons. The occasionally “just so” nature of the stories may be a touch simplistic for scientists. This very simplicity may, on the other hand, be too shocking to lay readers. They may need a little more priming before rejecting their long-held world view that they are more than instruments of natural selection in affairs of the heart. Nonetheless, it is a very entertaining and worthwhile read for both parties.

In his introduction, Barber communicates his confidence in evolutionary explanations of behavior with an infectious sense of excitement about the potential of natural selection to explain not just our more obvious species-inherent qualities but also our very ability to respond to change as individuals and as societies. From teen motherhood, to changes in women’s fashion trends, to the tormented love lives of Marilyn Monroe and Billie Holiday, Barber promises to tie it all back to Darwinist principles. It is hard not to be skeptical but it is also hard not to be hooked! You just have to read on to see how all of this is going to play itself out.

In the first chapter, Barber presents us with a brief primer on the brain’s role in gender identity, gender roles, sexual orientation, and sexual arousal. It is a 26 page whirlwind tour of sex differences in the brain, drawing from the literatures on gender differences in brain structure, functional and cognitive abilities, intersex conditions and sex reassignment failures, and homosexuality. Resorting to bulleted lists of evidence for the sexual differentiation of the brain, he pretty much covers the relevant empirical evidence. Do not, however, look for the finer methodological or interpretive caveats here of the studies he draws from. That is not the type of book this is. He concludes the chapter with a short explanation of the “chemistry of love” invoking phenylethylamine (PEA), oxytocin, and pheromones as the Cupids of this physiological romance. Not to be ignored, genes make their appearance in the second chapter where the reader is disabused of any perceived autonomy in his preferences for a certain type of mate. Beauty is indeed not in the eye of the beholder, but in the genes of the beheld. And then fashion kicks in to accentuate or exaggerate those features that indicate genetic health and fertility.

As an evolutionary psychologist, Barber is clearly aware that the reaction of many initiates to evolutionary psychology is one of slight to major narcissistic injury. In the past century, only Freud and his idea of the unconscious had made us feel less self-determining (and he, at least, had a purported cure in the form of psychoanalysis). Barber deals with this issue simply by making us feel that the real explanation behind our crushes, attractions, and drives is even more interesting than our little personal attributions. So, we are not the romantic leads in the story but isn’t the story great!? It’s hard to know if this is experienced as sufficient compensation for a reader to whom these ideas are new.

The dark side of mate selection and survival of the fittest is presented next. Testosterone is introduced as a potential villain and the basis of teen male violence (the young male syndrome), risky driving practices, TV and video violence, school shootings, and sports. Barber makes a point of also noting the benefits of testosterone and bemoans the bad rap it generally gets. However, by the time he does so, the big T looks too dangerous to warm up to. Barber then turns to women, their “wiles” and their efforts to domesticate men and their testosterone in the service of nest building and maintenance. After the previous chapter, it sounds like a tough job. One of the most interesting discussions in the book is the supposed female dilemma of choosing between the “geek” and the “alpha” male. The type of social success that ensures resources for mother and offspring requires the big bad T in a mate, but she also needs the emotional support and

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staying power not usually associated with alpha-maleness. What’s a girl to do?

When Barber turns his attention to the “cheating hearts of bird and humans,” he argues that strict monogamy is not our natural state. He is certainly not short of evidence for this assertion. He then reviews gender differences in sexual jealousy and differentiates what upsets men and women about infidelity, linking it to potential loss of parental investment in men and potential loss of resources for women, as per Buss’s well-known research in this area. Sexual harassment and rape are also discussed in this chapter and brought into the fold of his evolutionary explanations, even if only as an extreme manifestations of more prosocial sexual assertiveness in men. Barber then sets out to explain why marriages fail and finds the answer in sexually unfaithful wives, emotionally uninvolved husbands, small family size (few or no children), and in the 7-year itch (length of time to raise a viable child), all of which he ties directly to reproductive concerns.

After the seventh chapter, in which Barber takes a developmental view of how we learn to love and the impact of parents on romance, he adopts a more sociological lens, delving into sex linked occupations, the marriage market, single parenthood, and fashion trends. He argues how, despite the removal of barriers to create more equal-opportunities, gender differences continue to persist both at home and in the workplace, much as they have through history and in vastly different environments. He presents a provocative perspective of the plight of young African American women and the increasing rates of single parenthood in this community. He argues that lack of adequate numbers of marriageable partners, and not moral turpitude, has produced the increasing rates of unwed mothers. Single motherhood makes sense when the alternative is not to reproduce at all. Finally, Barber turns his attention to fashion and suggests that trends from dress-styles to beards can be related back to fluctuations in the economy and the way that these fluctuation influence parental investment and mate choice. It is in these chapters that one most feels the need for a consideration of competing hypotheses, even if the ultimate aim is to prove them wrong. Barber’s decision to pursue the evolutionary argument single-mindedly may have been a strategic one considering the aims and target audience for the book, but it entails a risk. The reader may be left wondering if Barber would have answers to alternate conceptualizations.

In conclusion, Barber gives us a short chapter in which he advocates for a science of romance, not just in the pursuit of truth, but in the name of practicality and conflict resolution. The argument is sufficiently convincing but it alerts the reader to the fact that this book was nowhere near enough about romance as its title suggested it would be, evolutionarily speaking or otherwise. It is as if Barber became so excited with the explanatory potential of his adopted theory that he started conquering more than the topic at hand. The result is a fascinating but somewhat scattered review of a very comprehensive set of phenomena from falling in love to reckless driving to miniskirts. These may all very well be related but for the length of this book, a more in-depth concentration on a more restricted set of related phenomena may have bolstered his argument and the novice reader’s understanding of both evolutionary psychology theory and the topic of romance.


Reviewed by Brian S. Mustanski, Ph.D.

Unarguably, sex is a large element of the Internet. Many of the most popular search terms are sex-related and the pornography industry is one of the few prospering in this new economic frontier (Mustanski, 2001). Some would go further and argue that the Internet is also playing a large role in sexuality by offering a new venue for people to meet for companionship and sex, both on- and off-line, and by providing unprecedented access to pornographic materials. Although at this stage we can only speculate about the extent to which the Internet plays a role in the sex lives of the general population, it is clear that those who make a career out of treating sexual and relationship problems must become aware of the increasing role that the Internet can play in causing and solving such problems. This book is the first to make an attempt at doing so.

The book is divided into three main sections. The first is labeled “Populations of Concern” and includes chapters on Internet sexuality among women, gay men, individuals with disabilities, and children. Each of these chapters provides discussion of both the special risks and benefits that sexual use of the Internet may cause among individuals in these populations. For example, the chapter by Leiblum and Döring notes not only the effects of “cyber-infidelity” on women, but also how women can use the Internet for purposes of sex education and empowerment. The chapter by Ross and Kauth considers both the potential for gay men to use the Internet irresponsibly for sexual purposes, but also the

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