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Jealousy's 'injured lover's hell' different for men and women

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Psychologists are having a spat about jealousy. Actually, they're debating about a curious difference between men and women when it comes to this emotion, once called the injured lover's hell.

Consider this question: What would bother you more, if your spouse or lover were having sex with somebody else, or if he or she became emotionally attached to someone else? Women overwhelmingly choose emotional involvement as more bothersome. Men are much more likely than women to choose sexual infidelity, though some studies find that emotional and sexual involvement bother men about equally.

The pattern has shown up in the United

States, Germany, Japan, Korea and the Netherlands.

Why the sex differences? Have cons of human evolution shaped one specific jealousy mind-set for men and another for women? Or could it be that men and women react more generally to differing ideas - maybe from painful experience - about how they cheat on each other?

It's evolution, says researcher David Buss of the University of Texas in Austin, who has become well known for tracing today's sexual behavior to the challenges faced by early human ancestors.

Not necessarily, reply two teams of psychologists. They engage Buss in a 20-page debate in November's issue of the journal *Psychological Science*.

Buss, who notes the evolutionary theory predicted that the sex differences would be

found, says the differences spring from basic human biology.

Unlike women, men can't be sure their babies are really theirs. As some say, "Mama's baby, papa's maybe." So throughout evolutionary time, men have run the risk that when they spend their time and resources in courting a woman and then protecting, feeding and rearing a child, it's all for some other guy's kid.

And in that case, they're helping that other guy leave descendants rather than creating their own.

Men who were particularly vigilant about keeping their mates from sleeping around would leave more of their own descendants than men who didn't care. So over evolutionary time, that advantageous difference would create "a very well-sculpted psychological mechanism that we call, for shorthand, male sexual jealousy," Buss said.

Now consider a woman in early human history. It didn't matter if her mate had a few one-night stands; her child was still her own.

The danger for her was that her mate might become emotionally attached to another woman. She would then lose his time, protection and other resources. So through evolutionary time, women would become especially sensitive to that risk, Buss argues.

Today's differing jealousy triggers are more psychological reactions than thought-out strategies, Buss said.

"We operate off our evolved psychological mechanisms, because that's all we have," he said.

But others say the experimental results don't make a convincing case for the evolutionary argument.

"We don't need millions of years of natural selection to understand why you get that

effect," contends Yale psychology professor Peter Salovey.

He and colleague David DeSteno proposed what they consider a simpler explanation, called the double-shot hypothesis. It's based on what different people believe about how sex and love go together in the opposite sex.

Women, for example, might think a man typically can have sex without emotional involvement, but if he does get emotionally involved he'll certainly have sex.

So a woman who finds her mate emotionally involved with another woman is getting the double shot: emotional plus sexual infidelity. If she finds he slept with someone else, it's only a single shot.

That's why women find emotional involvement more bothersome, Salovey and DeSteno

See JEALOUSY, Page C4

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Sexes differ: Jealousy:

From Page C1

Men might think that for women, emotional involvement and sex are about equally likely to lead to the other, they said.

They tested their ideas by surveying 114 college students and a similar sized group of adults ages 25 and up. When asked which kind of infidelity was more distressing, men and women differed in the usual ways.

Participants were also asked about the behavior of the opposite sex: how likely it was that falling in love implied also having sex, and vice versa. Salovey and DeSteno suspected that the more this balance tipped in favor of love implying sex - as compared to sex implying love - the more likely a person would be to find emotional infidelity more distressing.

That's what they found, both for men and for women. And analysts found this effect accounted for the male-female differences.

So a special dislike for emotional infidelity comes from the tipped balance rather than directly from being a woman, Salovey said.

But why would women and men differ in their beliefs about the opposite sex? Probably mostly from direct experience, Salovey said. But evolution could play a role in predisposing people to those beliefs, or to influencing the behaviors in the other sex that

Buss sticks with the evolutionary argument, finding fault with the challenge's approach and data. And both he and DeSteno say they have more experimental results that cast doubt on the other's ideas.

In any case, Buss said it's important to study jealousy.

There's good evidence that male sexual jealousy is a leading cause of men battering and killing their wives, he said.

"We're not dealing with a trivial emotion here," Buss said. "We're dealing with an important emotion that causes a lot of destruction."

TOM CRUISE