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## Primal Urges

### Authors contend that promiscuity - not monogamy - is our norm



If monogamy feels impossible, there's good reason, argue the authors of a new book. It's not our natural state. Our promiscuous origins make faithfulness an unnatural impulse

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'Of all Earth's creatures, none is as urgently, creatively and constantly sexual as Homo sapiens,' authors Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jetha write in their new book *Sex at Dawn: The Prehistoric Origins of Modern Sexuality*.

The husband and wife team pore over anthropological, anatomical and psychosexual evidence, arriving at a bleak conclusion: Our rabid sexuality just doesn't gel with monogamy.

That's because we weren't a dutifully faithful species until the advent of agriculture, at the most 10,000 years ago, the authors contend. Before that, people evolved in "primal hordes" where food, shelter, childcare – and sex – were shared. Men didn't care about paternity because they had no private property to pass down, and women got all the resources they needed from their community, not individual men. That dynamic resurfaced with the original American swingers – not hippies, but crewcut Second World War [air force](#) pilots swapping wives at key parties. If a husband was killed overseas, the surviving pilots would, in theory, take care of his wife.

Our bodies offer even more clues to our promiscuous origins, from women's capacity for multiple orgasms to men's penises, the largest of all in the primate order. Still, the authors lament, monogamy persists as the norm even as high divorce rates, a burgeoning hook-up culture and a

porn industry grossing some hundred billion dollars annually declare our randy dispositions. Mr. Ryan, a research psychologist, spoke to The Globe and Mail from Barcelona.

**If promiscuity was the norm for our ancient ancestors, why does being cheated on hurt so much, in a way that feels instinctive?**

Things that feel natural aren't necessarily natural at all. That gut feeling is not a good guide to actual human nature.

**Do you really believe culture, and not nature, fuels sexual jealousy?**

To some extent jealousy is part of human nature but there are societies that accentuate it and societies that minimize it.

During the marriage ceremonies of the Canela [a tribe in Brazil], the woman's mother lectures the couple to never be jealous of each other's lovers because that will ruin their marriage. Or the Mosuo in China – here, jealousy is considered ridiculous, laughable and sort of pathetic. These structures are built right into the society to try and get people to calm down and minimize these feelings.

**You describe the Melanesian tribe in Oceania: Here, married men take young women as lovers to avoid marital monotony. The wives regard these concubines as status symbols. Are you advocating for something like that?**

No. We're not advocating for anything in this book other than a greater degree of sincerity and communication between couples.

**Do you see how women could find some of these tribal dynamics appalling?**

I could certainly see how a certain feminist perspective could read this book as a justification for men screwing around but that's a very shallow reading of the book. What we're arguing is that the war between the sexes is a false conflict. The conflict isn't between men and women: The conflict is between men and women together on one side, and social conventions on the other side that try to convince us that what we feel is unnatural and shameful.

**You write, “We'd like to confusingly suggest that most of us take sex way too seriously ... it's not love. Or sin. Or pathology. Or a good reason to destroy an otherwise happy family.”**

Two books, *Lust in Translation* by Pamela Druckerman and *Mating in Captivity* [by therapist Esther Perel] talk about the harm that's done from the automatic reaction. [Ms.] Druckerman calls it “the script:” if there's an affair, it's an indictment of the marriage. If the man is attracted to another woman, it's an indictment of his wife. In light of our evolutionary design, none of these things are necessarily an indictment of anyone. It's often a great mistake to end a marriage and dissolve a family over something that's really not necessarily that big of a deal. If there are lies involved and deception, those are very serious issues. But the sex itself isn't necessarily that big of a deal.

**You write that gay male couples seem to get this concept.**

A recent survey in [San Francisco](#) found that more than 50 per cent of long-term gay couples together five years or more were in relationships that allowed some degree of outside sexual contact.

**You also mention the French and their liberal attitude towards infidelity. Why are the French always held up as a model? Are they actually happier than us?**

According to [Ms.] Druckerman, the French tend to be a bit happier in terms of their sexuality. Certainly, anecdotally walking around Paris, the older women seem to see themselves as sexual beings. Their sexual lives seem to extend quite a bit further than for most American women. The evolved design of our species means the sexual passion between a couple tends to fade over time. If there's zero input of erotic energy coming from anywhere outside of the relationship, then the flame can get pretty low. This is all conjecture and I've never lived in France, but perhaps French women are getting this sexual energy from outside the marriage.

**By cheating – but you're not a fan of that term.**

It's a very loaded term. It assumes lies and deception. If the relationship has a provision for these sorts of things, then you're not necessarily cheating at all. You're playing the game everyone's agreed to.

**You end with a mention of a long-term triad relationship – Scott, Larry and Terisa. Do you think people in open relationships are better off? A lot of the book seems devoted to dissing the monogamous marriage.**

I don't think we diss monogamous marriage. I think we diss the lie that monogamous marriage comes naturally to Homo sapiens. That's what we keep banging away at. Next month my parents celebrate 50 years together and they have a wonderful marriage and I admire them greatly. It would never occur to me to diss people who make a decision to forsake all others and follow through with it. But it's like vegetarianism: I think there are philosophically sound reasons for being a vegetarian, but that doesn't mean a barbecue isn't going to smell good. That's what you have to face up to because of the animal that you are. We're not saying that everybody should be polyamorous or into group sex.

**How do you expect these insights to play out between couples? You write that you have “little helpful advice to offer.”**

We're hoping that people who read the book will approach their lives and relationships with a more informed, possibly more tolerant understanding of the difference between passion of the soul and passion of the body. Passion of the soul is something upon which you can found a family and expect to share a life together, to grow old together, to take care of each other in sickness and in health. Passion of the body is something that's transitory, that's fun while it lasts but doesn't last long. To conflate those things causes great confusion and great suffering.

*This interview has been condensed and edited.*

*Editor's Note: 10,000 years ago, the authors contend, people evolved in “primal hordes.” Inaccurate information appeared in the original version of the story; the story has been corrected.*