

## Book Review

Mari Ruti, *The age of scientific sexism: How evolutionary psychology promotes gender profiling and fans the battle of the sexes*. Bloomsbury: New York, London, New Delhi, Sydney, 2015: 215 pp. ISBN 9781628923803

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A self-identified feminist and queer theorist, Mari Ruti has written a solidly argued academic book to highlight the epistemological, methodological and analytical flaws of different academic and popular science books that take an evolutionary psychology approach to gender differences in human mating. In *'The age of scientific sexism'* Ruti examines evolutionary theories of romantic conduct, focussing on what she calls “the standard narrative” of human mating behaviour. Selecting different evolutionary psychology authors, Ruti discusses the works of Robert Wright (1994; Chapter 1) and David Buss (2003; Chapter 2), moving on to Geoffrey Miller (2000; Chapter 3), and Christopher Ryan and Cacilda Jethá (2011; Chapter 4). The final chapter considers the wider cultural implications of evolutionary gender profiling and has a clear political message: Emphasising gender differences rather than similarities is a key element in maintaining gender inequality.

Ruti begins *'The age of scientific sexism'* by discussing evolutionary authors whose work she finds particularly challenging from a feminist point of view. In the following chapters, she reviews the work of more moderate evolutionary writers while, in the final chapter, the book culminates in a culture-based, feminist discussion of gender differences and similarities and their implications. When discussing Wright's work in Chapter 1, Ruti highlights the contradiction of women being portrayed as largely asexual while simultaneously having to

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cope with the restrictions placed on their sexuality. Furthermore, Ruti reflects on the evolutionary view of women becoming ‘obsolete by the age of fifty’ due to their declining fertility and likens many of Wright’s and other evolutionary psychologists’ arguments to the morality of Victorian England. Ruti does concede that evolutionary psychologists generally accept that Darwin’s ideas were informed by Victorian Zeitgeist but also points out that some of the more contemporary writers such as Wright appear to refer to monogamy in this now outdated sense, rather than acknowledging 21<sup>st</sup> century serial monogamy as a reality for both sexes. In doing so, Ruti here starts her narrative on the link between ideology and evolutionary psychological thinking, which she maintains throughout the remainder of the book.

In Chapter 2, Ruti criticises David Buss’s use of his famous 37 cultures study and particularly emphasises a) the gap between Buss’s popular science books and his academic papers and b) the critical responses Buss received for his more moderately presented academic papers from fellow academics. Chapters 1 and 2 both echo Ruti’s criticism that the mate preferences thesis argued within evolutionary psychology is more likely to be an ideological agenda of the (usually male) evolutionary scientists rather than a scientific finding. In line with this argument, Ruti entitles Chapter 2 ‘*The ideology of gender difference*’. Indeed, when studying Buss’s academic research (e.g., Buss et al., 1990,) more closely, his conclusions regarding sex differences in human mate choice are rather puzzling and I agree with Ruti that Buss seems to frame his findings very differently depending on whether he communicates with his academic peers or the general public. The popular science publications appear to emphasise binary, sex-typed approaches to human mating, while Buss concedes in his academic work (consistent with his data) that sex differences in human mate preferences are negligible (2.4% of the total variance) in comparison to cultural differences.

The tensions between evolutionary psychology's emphasis of gender differences and feminist psychology's attempts to dismantle them are further brought to the fore in Chapter 3, *'The arrogance of the backlash'*. This chapter discusses the ways in which the feminist literature has challenged gender stereotypes whereas evolutionary psychology appears to have been largely concerned with maintaining clear cut gender dichotomies. Ruti challenges the misrepresentation of contemporary feminist ideas in the evolutionary literature. Her challenge includes pointing out that contemporary, third-wave feminism attempts to break down gender dichotomies, and makes a passionate call against the evolutionary practice of gender profiling. Moreover, Ruti acknowledges how scientific approaches to gender stereotyping have changed over time and, again, discusses the link between gender differences and gender inequality. In doing so, Ruti addresses the long-standing debate of cultural versus biological origins of human behaviour and cultural production, and whether in evolutionary psychology there may be a case of arguing along the lines of 'how things "ought" to be' where there should be open-minded academic curiosity instead.

In Chapter 4, *'The downfall of the coy female'*, Ruti turns her attention to the inequities that characterise sexuality. Here she discusses the focus of evolutionary psychology on portraying females as generally disinterested in sexual activity other than for reproductive purposes. Moreover, Ruti discusses Ryan and Jethá's (2011) concept of *'flintstonization'* - the tendency to project modern day social arrangements onto evolutionary roots. Part of this chapter is also an in-depth criticism of the literature, particularly of John Gray's popular science work that dichotomises gender, signified by the 'Mars and Venus' in the titles and narratives of his popular self-help books. Ruti voices concern about the revival of gendered perceptions of male sexual readiness and female indifference when it comes to the need for variety in sexual partners. As she points out here, part of these 'sex differences' may lie in societal or cultural factors that prevent women from admitting their interest in sexual

variation, just as men are incentivised for the same admission. In this sense, Chapter 4 – as many of the other chapters – functions as a critical review of the existing evolutionary psychology literature, in terms of popular science as well as academic publications.

The cultural contexts for difference discussed in Chapter 4 are emphasised again in Chapter 5 where Ruti addresses cultural myths, sexual double standards and ‘cruel optimism’. She discusses how Western capitalism is invested in and dependent upon the institution of marriage as a way of increasing work productivity and maintaining the larger social order. Ruti argues that the longstanding tradition and expectation for people to get married and have children particularly locks women into traditional gender arrangements, where they are expected to be mothers and wives first, before pursuing professional careers. As Ruti points out, this sex-typed path to happiness does not appear to work for many people and, even if endorsed, requires class privileges not available to large parts of the human population. Beyond the contemporary necessity of women working outside the home, Ruti highlights the likely gaps between idealistically painted domestic bliss and the realities of being a full-time mother and homemaker. In particular, Ruti reviews the works by a number of feminist authors and writers, for example, Laura Kipnis and Sarah Ahmed, who point out the necessity of romantic and sexual stability for industrial and post-industrial societies to remain functioning, usually at the expense of people’s sexual adventurousness, happiness and egalitarian developments.

Especially in the earlier chapters, Ruti’s clear and critical position on evolutionary psychology put me on the verge of taking a defensive stance on behalf of the field, and I was at risk of not fully engaging with her arguments. As Ruti herself outlines in the introduction, she received hateful comments following a *Psychology Today* blog post on the *Cougar Phenomenon*. Similar to some of the arguments brought forward by her critics, I questioned her credentials, as a Professor of English, to comment on quantitative, empirical research. Manuela Thomae, *Mari Ruti, The age of scientific sexism: How evolutionary psychology promotes gender profiling and fans the battle of the sexes*, *Feminism & Psychology* 0(0) pp. 1-4. Copyright © 2017 (The Author). Reprinted by permission of SAGE Publications.

Yet, from Chapter 2 onwards, I was captured by Ruti's clear and precise writing and thinking, as well as her critical analysis of the gender differences presented in Buss's 37 culture's study. Looking at the original study published by Buss in 1989 and 1990, I had to revise my initial scepticism. In this respect, Ruti's arguments presented in Chapter 2 became a crossroads in my reading of *'The age of scientific sexism'* and I thoroughly enjoyed this critical and engaging book.

That said, I sometimes found it hard to follow the structure of the book and feel that some of these difficulties may have been due to the fact that Ruti communicates many different and, at times, complex, ideas. For example, my review of the separate chapters above focusses largely on the work of what – in my understanding – are major names in the field of evolutionary psychology. Yet, Ruti discusses so many more ideas in each chapter and builds many complex and considered links across the evolutionary and feminist literature. The result of this approach, for me, was mixed: It was at times hard to follow the logic of the narrative and to decide why a certain argument was made in one place in the book rather than another. However, the interconnectedness of Ruti's arguments may not allow for a different flow of argument and I found it helpful to be repeatedly reminded of the core arguments made in the book, which held Ruti's overall narrative firmly together.

In her writing, Ruti at times uses very direct language, voicing her position on the evolutionary ideas put forward by some of the authors. In doing so she directly speaks to and engages with the reader, for example:

But let's not miss Wright's main point, namely that any active display of female sexual desire results in her being disrespected, even deemed "contemptible", so ladies, once again, you have a clear-cut choice: Sex or respect. (p. 41)

This conversation continues throughout the book and Ruti's arguments become clearer and more engaging as the book goes on. Overall, Ruti's arguments are, paradoxically, complex and simple at the same time: While she takes a clear stance against the incorrect focus on gender differences rather than similarities in human mate preferences, she includes an incredible amount of literature from a variety of academic disciplines to create a strong and compelling line of argument.

In conclusion, I found *'The age of scientific sexism'* engaging and easy to read. The narrative of the book benefits from the direct conversation Ruti has with her reader and the clarity of her ideas. Although I would classify this book as more intended for an academic rather than a popular audience, it will make an interesting read for a wide range of readers. Ruti's book also is a valuable addition to post- and undergraduate modules on evolutionary psychology, transforming an often one-sided, quantitative and evolutionary story into a more balanced viewpoint – whether one agrees with Ruti or not.

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