

Male Sexual Proprietariness and Violence Against Wives

Margo I. Wilson and Martin Daly

There is a cross-culturally ubiquitous connection between men's sexual possessiveness and men's violence.¹ We have studied accounts of uxoricides (wife killings) from a broad range of societies, and find that male sexual proprietariness—broadly construed to encompass resentment both of infidelity and of women's efforts to leave marriages—is everywhere implicated as the dominant precipitating factor in a large majority of cases.² The discovery of wifely infidelity is viewed as an exceptional provocation, likely to elicit a violent rage, both in societies where such a reaction is considered a reprehensible loss of control and in those where it is considered a praiseworthy redemption of honor. Indeed, such a rage is widely presumed to be so compelling as to mitigate the responsibility of even homicidal cuckolds.

Battered women nominate "jealousy" as the most frequent motive for their husbands' assaults, and their assailants commonly make the same attribution.^{1,3} Moreover, assaulted wives often maintain that their husbands are not only violently jealous about their interactions with other men, but are so controlling as to curtail contacts with female friends

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and family. In a 1993 national survey, Statistics Canada interviewed more than 8,000 women currently residing with male partners. In addition to answering questions about their experiences of violence, the women indicated whether five statements about autonomy-limiting aspects of some men's behavior applied to their husbands. Autonomy-limiting behavior was especially likely to be attributed to those husbands who were also reported to have behaved violently, and women who had experienced relatively serious or frequent assaults were much more likely to affirm each of the five statements than were women who had experienced only lesser violence (Table 1).⁴ These and other data suggest that unusually controlling husbands are also unusually violent husbands. Rather than being one of a set of alternative controlling tactics used by proprietary men, wife assault appears to go hand in hand with other tactics of control.

EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY, INTRASEXUAL COMPETITION, AND MARITAL ALLIANCE

Why should sexually proprietary feelings be linked with violence in this way? Although it is often supposed that wives are assaulted mainly because they are accessible, legitimate targets when men are frustrated or angry, mere opportunity cannot account for the differential risk of violent victim-

ization within households. Wives are far more likely than other relatives to be murdered by an adult in their household (Fig. 1).² Wife assault has distinct motives. We propose that a satisfactory account of the psychological links between male sexual proprietariness and violence will depend on an understanding of the adaptive problems that men have faced in the course of human evolutionary history and the ways in which the psyche is organized to solve them. Those adaptive problems include both the risk of losing the wife, a valued reproductive resource, to a rival and the risk of directing paternal investments to another man's child.¹

Adaptations are organismic attributes that are well "designed," as a result of a history of natural selection, to achieve functions that promoted reproductive success in ancestral environments.⁵ Because organisms can usefully be analyzed into numerous distinct parts with complementary functions, investigation in the life sciences is almost invariably conducted in the shadow of (often inexplicit) adaptationist ideas. Sound hypotheses about what the heart or lungs or liver are "for" were essential first steps for investigating their physiology, for example. Psychological research is similarly (and equally appropriately) infused with adaptationist premises.

The goal of psychological science is and always has been the discovery and elucidation of psychological adaptations. Evolutionary thinking can help. By paying explicit attention to adaptive significance and selective forces, evolutionists are better able to generate hypotheses about which developmental experiences and proximate causal cues are likely to affect which aspects of behavior, and what sorts of contingencies, priorities, and combinatorial infor-

Table 1. Association between violence against wives and husbands' autonomy-limiting behaviors, according to a national probability sample of Canadian wives⁴

Statement	History of violence against wife		
	Serious violence N = 286	Relatively minor only N = 1,039	None N = 6,990
"He is jealous and doesn't want you to talk to other men"	39	13	4
"He tries to limit your contact with family or friends"	35	11	2
"He insists on knowing who you are with and where you are at all times"	40	24	7
"He calls you names to put you down or make you feel bad"	48	22	3
"He prevents you from knowing about or having access to the family income, even if you ask"	15	5	1

Note. Table entries are the percentages of respondents affirming that each item applied to their husbands. Violence was categorized as "serious" or "relatively minor" on the basis of the alleged assaultive acts; the validity of this distinction is supported by sample interviews indicating that an injury requiring medical attention occurred in 72% of the incidents that met the "serious" criterion versus 18% of the "relatively minor" violent incidents.

mation-processing algorithms are likely to be instantiated in the architecture of the mind.^{6,7} Psychological constructs from self-esteem to color vision to sexual jealousy are formulated at a level of abstraction intended to be of panhuman (cross-cultural) generality. If these things exist and are complexly structured and organized, they almost certainly evolved to play

some fitness-promoting role in our ancestors' lives. But although psychologists usually recognize that the phenomena they study have utility, jealousy in particular has often been dismissed as a functionless epiphenomenon or pathology. In light of what is known about evolution by selection, this is scarcely plausible.

In a sexual population, all the

males are engaged in a *zero-sum game* in which the paternal share of the ancestry of all future generations is divided among them, while the females are engaged in a parallel contest over the maternal share of that ancestry. In a fundamental sense, then, one's principal competitors are same-sex members of one's own species. But although it is true for both females and males that selection entails a zero-sum competitive contest for genetic posterity, the evolutionary consequences are not necessarily similar in the two sexes. In particular, *sexual selection* (the component of selection that is attributable to differential access to mates) is generally of differential intensity, leading to a variety of sexually differentiated adaptations for intrasexual competition.⁸

In most mammals, the variance in male fitness is greater than the variance in female fitness, with the result that male mammals are generally subject to more intense sexual selection than females, and that the psychological and morphological attributes that have evolved for use in intrasexual competition are usually costlier and more dangerous in males than in

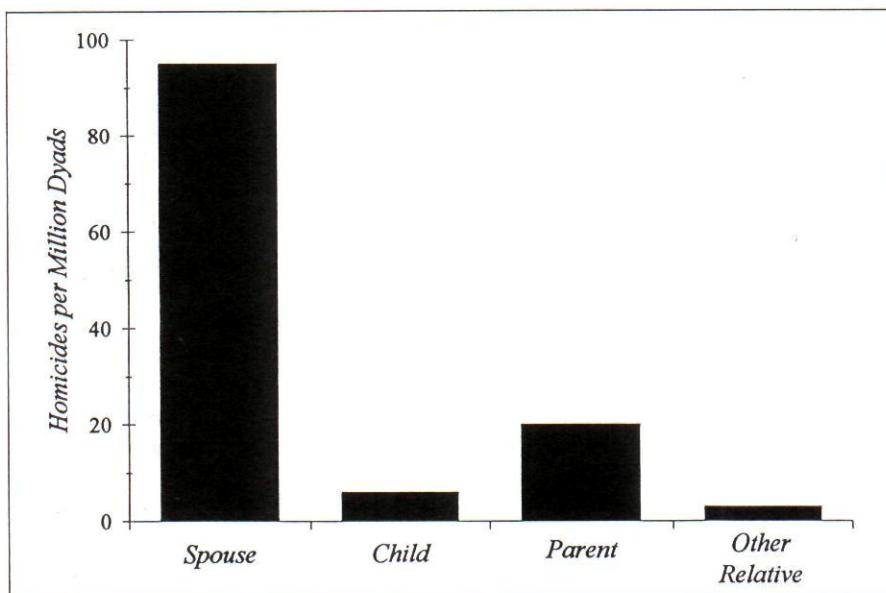


Fig. 1. Homicide victimization rates characteristic of different categories of co-residing relatives (considering only adults as potential perpetrators) in the city of Detroit, 1972.²

females. The human animal is no exception to these generalizations, and rivalry among men is a ubiquitous and sometimes deadly source of conflict. Where homicide rates are high, most victims are men, and their killers are mainly unrelated male acquaintances; the predominant motive is not robbery, but some sort of interpersonal conflict, especially a status or "face" dispute, with an overt element of sexual rivalry apparent in a substantial minority of the cases.² Of course, killing often oversteps the bounds of utility, but the circumstances under which dangerous violence is used in these cases bespeak its more typical functionality in its much more numerous nonlethal manifestations. And although the principal victims of men's lethal assaults are other men, violence is a coercive social tool that can be used on women, too, including wives.

From a selectionist perspective, the marital relationship has special properties. The fitnesses of genetic relatives overlap in proportion to genealogical proximity, a situation that engenders selection for altruistic and cooperative inclinations toward kin. Mates share genetic interests, too, but their solidarity is more fragile. By reproducing together, a monogamous couple may attain a state in which all exigencies affect their fitnesses identically, a situation conducive to consensus and harmony. However, the correlation between their expected fitnesses can be abolished or even rendered negative if one or both betray the relationship.⁷

Is it reasonable to propose the existence of an evolved social psychology specific to the marital relationship? Certainly, marital alliance is neither a sporadically distributed cultural option nor a modern discovery or invention, like agriculture or writing. Women and men everywhere enter into so-

cially recognized unions, with a set of complementary sex-specific entitlements and obligations predicated on the complementarity of female and male sexual and reproductive roles, and they have done so for many millennia. We therefore expect that there are certain fundamental, universal sources of marital conflict, reflecting situations in which one marriage partner could have gained fitness in ancestral human environments at the other partner's expense. These situations would include conflicts over equity of contributions to the couple's joint endeavors (work sharing), over each partner's nepotistic interest in the welfare of his or her distinct kindred (in-law disputes), over asymmetrical temptations to abandon the union, and over sexual infidelity. In a pair-forming, biparental species, most of these conflicts can apply both ways, but the potential effects of infidelity are an exception: Males, unlike females, can be cuckolded and unwittingly invest their parental efforts in the service of rivals' fitness.

There is abundant contemporary, historical, and ethnographic evidence that even closely guarded women expend effort and incur risk to evade mates, especially when in marriages not of their own choosing.¹ But the proposition that the risk of misattributed paternity has been a distinct selective force on male psyches, over and above the effects of alienation of wives, implies that infidelity within undissolved marriages has been a threat to male fitness. Male sexual anatomy and physiology lend some support to this proposition. In cross-species comparisons, testis size closely tracks the degree to which females mate polyandrously in the short term, presumably because such matings engender *sperm competition* among rival ejaculates within the female reproductive tract, se-

lecting for males who have high sperm counts and ejaculate volumes and who therefore get more of their own sperm into the contest.^{9,10} Human male testis size suggests an ancestral level of polyandrous mating between the "promiscuity" of female chimpanzees and the monogamy of female gorillas. Moreover, if sperm competition has been a selective force, one might expect that men will exhibit contingently variable responses to cues that might indicate some risk of female infidelity. Results of one recent study support this expectation: The number of spermatozoa transferred in a given copulation in steady couples was better predicted by the proportion of time since the last copulation that the pair were out of contact than by the mere passage of time since the last ejaculation, an effect interpreted as a sophisticated psychophysiological adaptation to lapses in mate monitoring.¹⁰ Some genuine risk of misattributed paternity would also appear to explain systematic biases of attention and attribution favoring allegations of paternal rather than maternal resemblances in babies.⁷

Undetected cuckoldry poses a major threat to a man's fitness, but for women the threat is slightly different: that a husband's efforts and resources will be diverted to the benefit of other women and their children. It follows that the arousal of men's and women's proprietary feelings toward their mates is likely to have evolved to be differentially attuned to distinct cues indicative of the sex-specific threats to fitness in past environments. Diverse evidence on feelings, reactions, and cultural practices supports the hypothesis that men are more intensely concerned with sexual infidelity per se and women more intensely concerned with the allocation of their mates' resources, affection, and attentions.^{1,11}

CONTINGENT CUING OF MALE SEXUAL PROPRIETARINESS AND THE EPIDEMIOLOGY OF VIOLENCE AGAINST WIVES

If sexual proprietariness is aroused by cues of threats to sexual monopoly, and if use of violence is contingent on cues of its utility (including tolerable costs), then variations within and between societies in the frequency and severity of violence against wives may be largely attributable to variations in such cues.¹ Those relevant to the arousal of sexual proprietariness are likely to include cues of pressure from potential rivals and cues of one's partner's fertility and attractiveness to those rivals. Regarding the former issue, we would expect a husband to be sensitive to indicators of the local intensity of male competition and sexual poaching, and to indicators of the status, attractiveness, and resources of potential rivals relative to himself. Being part of a

relatively large age cohort may also be expected to intensify male-male competition, especially if same-age women are unavailable; thus, cohort-size effects on intra-sexual rivalry and hence on the coercive constraint of women may be especially evident where age disparities at marriage are large. Parameters like relative cohort size, local marital instability, and local prevalence of adultery clearly cannot be cued simply by stimuli immediately present, but must be induced from experience accumulated over large portions of the life span.

If men's violence and threats function to limit female autonomy, husbands may be motivated to act in these ways in response to probabilistic cues that their wives may desert them. Women who actually leave their husbands are often pursued, threatened, and assaulted; separated wives are even killed by their husbands at substantially higher rates than wives who live with their husbands (Fig. 2).³ The elevation of uxoricide risk at separation is even more severe than the contrasts in Figure 2 suggest be-

cause the rate denominators include all separated wives regardless of the duration of separation, whereas when separated wives are killed, it is usually soon after separation. Of course, the temporal association between separation and violence does not necessarily mean that the former caused the latter; however, many husbands who have killed their wives had explicitly threatened to do so should their wives ever leave, and explain their behavior as a response to the intolerable stimulus of their wives' departure.

Why are men ever motivated to pursue and kill women who have left them? Such behavior is spiteful in that it is likely to impose a net cost on its perpetrator as well as its victim, and therefore challenges the evolutionary psychological hypothesis that motives and emotions are organized in such a way as to promote the actors' interests. Moreover, if the adaptive function of the motivational processes underlying violence against wives resides in retaining and controlling one's mate, as we have suggested, killing is all the more paradoxical. The problem is akin to that of understanding vengeance.² A threat is an effective social tool, and usually an inexpensive one, but it loses its effectiveness if the threatening party is seen to be bluffing, that is, to be unwilling to pay the occasional cost of following through when the threat is ignored or defied. Such vengeful follow-through may appear counterproductive—a risky or expensive act too late to be useful—but effective threats cannot "leak" signs of bluff and may therefore have to be sincere. Although killing an estranged wife appears futile, threatening one who might otherwise leave can be self-interested, and so can pursuing her with further threats, as can advertisements of anger and ostensible obliviousness to costs.

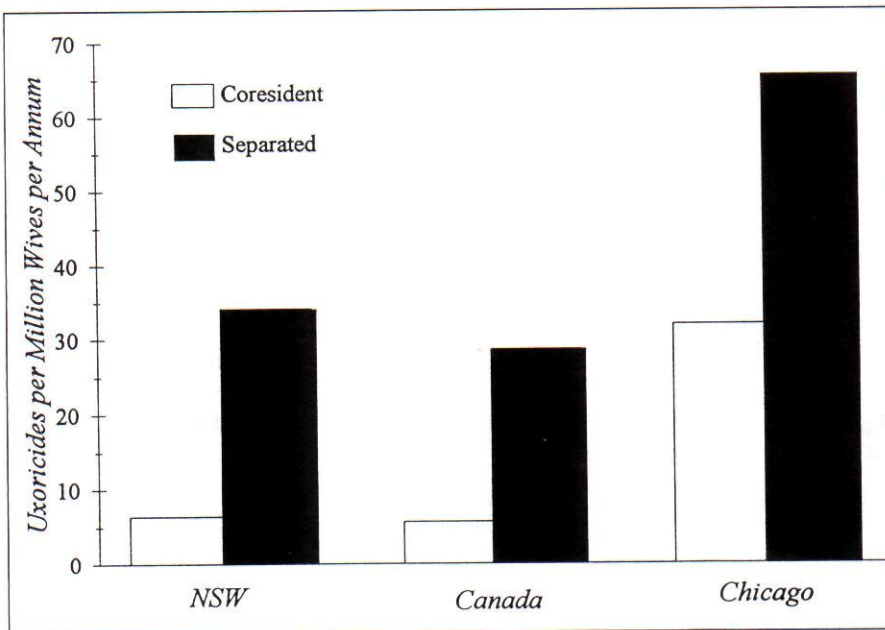


Fig. 2. Rates of uxoricides perpetrated by registered-marriage husbands, for co-residing versus estranged couples in New South Wales (NSW), Australia (1968–1986); Canada (1974–1990); and Chicago (1965–1989).³

Evolutionary psychologists have predicted and confirmed that men are maximally attracted to young women as sexual and marital partners.¹² This fact suggests that sexual proprietariness will be

relatively intensely aroused in men married to younger women, and young wives indeed incur the highest rates of both lethal²⁻⁴ (Fig. 3) and nonlethal⁴ violence by husbands. (It might be suggested that

male sexual jealousy cannot be an evolved adaptation because men remain sexually jealous of postmenopausal or otherwise infertile women, but adaptations can have evolved only to track ancestrally informative cues of fertility and not fertility itself. In a modern society with contraception, improved health, and diverse cosmetic manipulations, postmenopausal women are likely to exhibit fewer cues of age-related declining reproductive value than still-fertile women in ancestral societies.¹²)

There are several reasons to suppose that husbands may be relatively insecure in their proprietary claims in *de facto* marriages, which have higher rates of dissolution and a weaker or more ambiguous legal status than registered unions. And, indeed, wives in *de facto* marital unions in Canada incur an eight times greater risk of uxoricide and a four times greater risk of nonlethal assault by husbands.⁴ However, registered and *de facto* unions differ in many ways, and the higher risk of uxoricide and assault in the latter may be due to a complex combination of factors, including youth, poverty, parity, and the presence of stepchildren;^{2,4,7} whether adultery and desertion are greater sources of conflict in *de facto* unions than in registered unions is unknown. Demographic risk markers such as type of marital union and age are undoubtedly correlated with several variables that may be more directly causal to the risk of violence; elucidation of their relative roles awaits further research. However, it was the logic of evolution by selection which suggested to us that these demographic variables are likely correlates of breaches of sexual exclusivity and hence of violence.

Evolution by selection offers a framework for the development of hypotheses about the functional design of motivational-emotional-

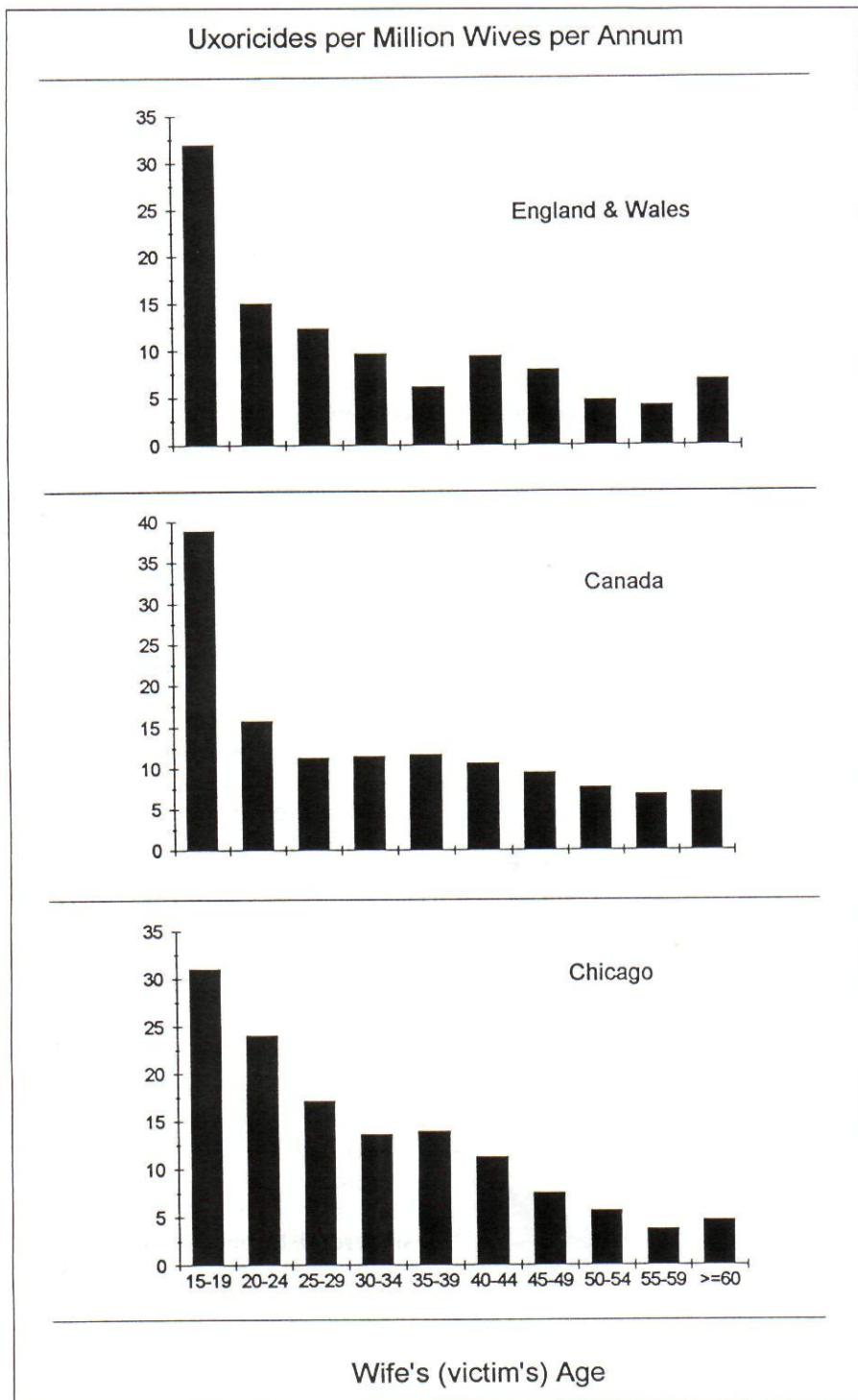


Fig. 3. Uxoricide rates as a function of the victim's age, in England and Wales (1977–1990), Canada (1974–1990), and Chicago (1965–1989).³

cognitive subsystems of the mind such as male sexual proprietariness, providing hints about proximate causal cues, modulated expression, attentional priorities, and perceptual and informational processing. We have argued that the development and modulation of male sexual proprietariness is contingent on ecologically valid cues of threats to a sexually exclusive relationship. The link between male sexual proprietariness and violent inclinations has presumably been selected for because violence and threat work to deter sexual rivals and limit female autonomy. (This is not to say that violent capacities and inclinations were not also subject to selection pressures in other contexts, including intergroup warfare and hunting.) The expression of male sexual proprietariness, including violent manifestations, will depend not only on the presence and incidence of ecologically valid cues, but also on community, family, and person-specific factors that

are likely to affect the thresholds and other parameter settings of the psychological mechanisms involved.

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Psychopathology and Cognitive and Family Functioning in Suicidal African-American Adolescents

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Suicide is the third leading cause of death among adolescents. Research suggests the ratio of attempts to completed suicides may be as high as 200 to 1.¹ Recent epidemiological increases in suicide attempts in African Americans are quite dramatic. For example, between 1960 and 1987, the rate of suicide attempts in African-

American males ages 15 to 24 tripled.² Key risk factors for suicide attempts in adolescents include prior suicide attempts, being female, and residing in an economically deprived environment.¹

Historically, there has been a paucity of research on African-American adolescent suicide, and only recently have researchers

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