

‘Natural Law’ column number eight, by Michael Price (uncorrected proof)

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The scandalous male

Sex scandals involving powerful men seem to be getting increasingly common, and along with politicians and athletes, bankers are some of the most likely professionals to be embroiled in them (e.g. Dominique Strauss-Kahn, Fred Goodwin, James McDermott, Paul Eustace, Steve Rattner). Virtually all of these scandals are caused, primarily, by the behavior of the male of our species. While many people have been trying to explain why this is so, their ability to do so is often hampered by a fear of biology.

From an evolutionary perspective, there are clear and elementary reasons for why men cause more sex scandals than women. Most of these scandals involve people taking huge risks—to their family, career and reputation—in order to pursue new mating opportunities. And in the evolutionary past, men stood to gain much more than women from new mating opportunities. This is true because whichever sex makes the lower *obligatory* (i.e., minimum) investment in offspring production will also be the sex that benefits more from having multiple mates. In most species, this obligatory “parental investment” is much lower for males than for females (e.g. in humans, a few minutes and a little sperm for males versus months of gestation and years of lactation for females). Due to their lower investment, men evolved to be less choosy about sexual partners and more interested in promiscuous, uncommitted sex. To illustrate this logic, imagine an ancestral man and woman who could each potentially have 100 mates in one year. The woman could have exactly one child in that period, whether she had one or 100 partners, so the 99 extra partners wouldn’t do her much good. For the man, however, 99 extra partners could in theory mean 99 extra children.

Human fathers can often benefit their children in crucial ways by investing more than the bare minimum, and will typically invest far beyond it. And men are of course not solely interested in uncommitted sex; most men strive for and deeply value long-term, committed relationships. However, even when involved in such a relationship, the average man will find the prospect of a new mating opportunity to be more compelling than the average woman. And when he’s in a high-status position—as are many politicians, athletes and bankers—these opportunities will be more frequent, because women have evolved to be attracted to high status men.

Often, the parts of the man’s brain that are designed to pursue new sex partners—his “mating modules”—will be at war with other evolved parts of his brain, particularly the modules that look after his long-term interests in protecting his family, career and reputation. When faced with a new mating opportunity, his mating modules will urge him to pursue it, in opposition to the influence of his long-term modules. The mating modules may not always play fair, however. They may actively sabotage the efforts of the long-term modules, by causing the man to underestimate and discount the damage

that his behavior would cause his family, career and reputation, and to overestimate his chances of getting away with it. His mating modules may, in other words, cause him to act in ways that will make others look back on his behavior as being surprisingly reckless and stupid, and make them wonder why he ever thought he would get away with it.

Even though there is this straightforward evolutionary explanation for men's greater willingness to risk everything for sex, many people are afraid to accept it. In a recent *New York Times* piece about why men cause more sex scandals, for example, Sheryl Stolberg says that to explain this sex difference as biological would be to "dismiss" it. And writing for *Slate* on the same topic, Amanda Marcotte rejects the biological explanation as a "trap". Their word choice is revealing. The evolutionary view is not just an explanation but a *dismissal*, the implication being that if "scandalous" male behavior were biological, then there'd be nothing that could be done to change it, and we'd be *trapped* into having to declare it condonable or inevitable. The truth is, however, that even though this behavior does have biological causes, it's a non sequitur to say that it's therefore condonable or inevitable. After all, cross-culturally, men are far more likely than women to commit murder, and there are excellent evolutionary reasons for this sex difference; yet thankfully, most people in modern societies don't see male murder as condonable or inevitable. If more people understood that recognizing a behavior's evolutionary roots has nothing to do with excusing it, then they might feel less compelled to see the truth as a trap.