



The Sex Contract: The Evolution of Human Behavior

Helen Fisher

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Occasional markings. Slightly curled corners.

The Sex Contract: The Evolution of Human Behavior Details

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Byrd Alyssa says

A worthwhile read for anyone trying to get a perspective beyond "Men are from Mars...Woman from Venus..." regarding men, women and biological factors effecting our behavior towards one another, from an easy reading, anthropological view.

Alicia Fox says

This book is clearly a product of its time, and a few minor items have been refined by evolutionary psychologists and biologists. The gist of it still holds true to research conducted since the early 1980s.

A lot of what experts discuss in this field has been published in not-so-great self-help books (I have yet to read more by Fisher, but suspect hers are better). Reading this, I can tell I'm reading something written by another woman--something I definitely appreciate. There's no condescension or lack of understanding regarding how women behave.

If you're reading this as an introduction to evolutionary biology and psychology, I recommend it. But for me, I can't stress enough how refreshing (and eye-opening) it is to read a general scientific text which posits women at the center without appearing to try hard to do so. It's a book about evolution which doesn't focus on early hominid males hunting. It would be interesting to have a review from a man on this book--the question of, do you get it now? Do you now understand what it's like for a woman to read a book on "people" and see women included only in the margins?

I realize that more often than not, the majority of feminists are opposed to the research in this field. I hope they read this book. The content not only shows the role women have played in shaping human evolution and societies, but its focus and style make it one of the most-feminist-without-announcing-itself-as-such books I've ever read. And I've read a lot of books.

Mia says

This is a good review of Anthropology 101 together with some interesting hypotheses of why humans "bond" in serial monogamy. What bugs me about anthropologists in general, and Fisher in this text specifically, is their tendency to reconstruct the past through the lenses of how we think today. For example, use of the word "logical." I don't think we can assume that any hypothesis is necessarily "logical." It is logical in terms of how we see the world today, but I'm not convinced that using a 19th, 20th or 21st-century perspective is going to build a realistic picture of what was going on 20 million years ago when dryopithecus was hanging out.

Another problem I have is the use of data collected on other primate groups (orangutans, gorillas or Goodall's chimpanzees) as some sort of indicator of the behavior of our "ancestors." If human behavior has evolved, then hasn't gorilla or chimpanzee behavior evolved? Even if they seem "primitive" compared to us, they are still affected by natural selection and changes in thought processes or behavioral areas as well. To

ignore that fact is to disregard evolutionary theory. Knowing that they were not frozen in time while we moved forward, how can one use their behavior over the past 100 years as a model for what protohominids were like?

Brain size is touted again and again as an argument as ancient craniums have been measured and the growth put forward as evidence of our becoming more intelligent, but we know that brain size isn't necessarily an indicator of advanced intelligence. This was an argument used in the 19th-century to "prove" that women were inferior to men: overall brain size is smaller and, disregarding the fact of proportionality, therefore women were considered less intelligent. From my admittedly very basic understanding of the human brain, there are also chemical and electrical factors to take into consideration. Size alone tells us very little, and, unfortunately, we cannot research actual brains from millions of years ago.

I also could do without the little dramatizations that Fisher throws in. I understand that she writes for the general public as opposed to the niche of people who study anthropology, but I ended up skipping over those sections after a while because I felt they were useless stories that didn't add anything to the scientific content.

Ultimately, I think I am waiting for some Derridian thinker to come along and approach the last million years from a totally unexpected point of view that will be anything but "logical," but entirely plausible anyway because thinking about the past that long ago requires escaping from the constraints of 21st-century thought. I hope this thinker comes before I die!

Lori P. Arnold-Mann says

Excellent study of human behavior.

Christina says

Great book! I read this in a Physical Anthropology class in College. Loved it.

Elizabeth says

Fisher breaks down human evolution from the basis of monogamy to the reason for the family unit. Really intriguing theories. Would recommend this book to anyone interested with an in-depth look into why we are who we are.

Badri says

14 million years ago, the climate changed. Africa was becoming cooler and drier. The trees were thinning, and the apes were forced to come down to the grasslands to find food. This was dangerous. They had to rely more on each other - strength in numbers. A bit of cooperation and coordination was needed for survival.

As the climate change progressed, the woodlands disappeared altogether and it was savanna. 10 million years

ago, the apes had to adapt. They couldn't just eat wherever they found food - or they would be eaten themselves. They had to carry off the food to safety, which meant bipedalism was an advantage (hands are more efficient in carrying). As selection pressure pushed them toward walking on two feet, anatomical changes made child birth too dangerous.

Those females who tended to give birth prematurely had an advantage - they lived rather than die in child birth. And their offspring survived. But premature infants meant more work for the mother. She couldn't carry the baby on her back as in the four legged days. Carrying baby and food was tough. She needed help.

The females who could offer sex for longer periods in each cycle got more help. Selection drove the monthly period of heat longer and longer until it pretty much disappeared. She could now copulate almost all month, during pregnancy and quite soon after birthing. She got the males' favors in return - he shared more meat, and helped around.

One thing led to another, and soon they were becoming a bonded pair. This meant a whole lot of new brain functions - communication, planning, feelings like jealousy, kinship.

Let this film run few million years. Bingo! We have modern humans.

The female's ability to have sex pretty much all the time as pivotal to the evolution of homo sapiens, and this is what distinguishes us from all other creatures till today. And oh, we have technology, language, etc. too. But sex made it all happen.

Julene says

I read this years ago after I first went to hear Helen Fisher speak at the Museum of Natural History in NY. That was a profound experience for me because every thing she said resonated like it was there inside me and I knew it all along. And here was this anthropologist who had done the work and research. Yes, serial monogamy was evolutionary based on us coming to stand on two feet. What makes more sense! I was enthralled by her. I have not been able to read her later books to completion however. Maybe one was enough.

J. Dolan says

Like Barbara Seaman in her *Free and Female*, in the *Sex Contract* Ms. Fisher would put the lie to male effulgence and female shortcomings in the human sexual arena. She accomplishes this, however, inadvertently, as a by-product of her attempt as an anthropologist to explain the origins of heterosexual bonding and its formative place in the creation of that institution known as the nuclear family. The crux of her theory is that one of the main catalysts for bringing this about were the revolutionary changes in female sexuality that occurred eons ago among our protohominid ancestors. Foremost but not limited to these were nature's phasing out of estrus in our species, enabling women to make love the year-round; the birth and development of the clitoral system, resulting in the ability to achieve powerful and multiple orgasms; and the adaptation of breasts, protruding buttocks, a high voice, a forward-rotated vagina, and an increasingly hairless body, all designed to boost her desirability to her male partner. In addition, like many primates, she is hard-wired to want sex to the point of aggressively seeking it out if necessary. As space doesn't permit it here, I'll leave it to you to read the book and see for yourself how the above

contributed to the gender pair-bonding that characterizes our kind to this day. My point, and again if inadvertently Ms. Fisher's, is that the human female is a virtual sex machine with no equal on the planet, including her masculine counterpart. Why this dynamic should be reversed in the minds of most people is a question better explored in another kind of book.
