

The evolutionary biology of human female sexuality.
by Randy Thornhill & Steven W. Gangestad
Oxford University Press

The human animal has long been considered exceptional, or even unique, because female libido and sexual behavior apparently vary little over the ovarian cycle. If you have accepted the proposition that a crucial event in human social evolution was the “loss of estrus”, read this book. Recent discoveries about ovarian cycle stage effects on women’s psychology and behavior abound (many but by no means all of them provided by the authors), and these discoveries demand a thorough rethinking of the evolution of human sexuality.

Thornhill and Gangestad argue that women possess two distinct evolved sexualities. One is the “extended sexuality” that women engage in when conception is impossible; the other they call “estrous” sexuality. The former functions to elicit “material benefits” from males, the latter to acquire “good genes” for offspring, and in keeping with these distinct functions, candidate male partners are evaluated on distinct criteria in the two contexts. In making the case for these views, the authors provide an impressively up-to-date, thorough, and even-handed review not only of recent work on human sexuality in relation to ovarian cycle stage, but also of relevant work on other taxa and of the latest theoretical and empirical work on sexual selection and antagonistic co-evolution of the sexes. The result is a *tour de force*, and those who wish to refute it will have to come to grips with its forceful argumentation and impressive breadth of information.

I, for one, think it unfortunate that Thornhill and Gangestad choose to call woman’s midcycle sexuality “estrus”. They acknowledge that they are modifying the definition of this word and explain their rationale, but it will needlessly antagonize readers, especially when the authors seem to forget that theirs is not the standard dictionary definition and assert that others’ claims that humans lack estrus are “incorrect”. But those who are annoyed by this - and I fear it may be many - really must set that aside and attend to the book’s fascinating empirical content and interpretive arguments. No one could read this book closely and fail to learn a great deal.

Martin Daly
Department of Psychology, Neuroscience & Behaviour
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada L8S 4K1