

Letter

**ANOTHER MEANING OF DARWINIAN FEMINISM:
TOWARD INCLUSIVE EVOLUTIONARY ACCOUNTS OF
SEXUAL ORIENTATIONS**

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Abstract

This letter argues for an understanding of Darwinian feminism that is rooted in the contemporary intersectional feminist theorizing that seeks to represent historically marginalized groups in an inclusive, non-marginalized manner. To this end, a feminist approach to sexual orientation is presented and detailed, with a historical example of such an approach that already existed within behavioral science but that has been lost over time. The feminist approach presented is inclusive of homosexual, bisexual, and other minority sexual orientations alongside heterosexual orientation in a manner that does not posit paradoxes or otherwise marginalizing conceptions. Finally, the importance of such feminist theorizing as a part of the future of evolutionary psychology is discussed.

Keywords: Feminism, intersectionality, evolutionary psychology, sexual orientation, anthroposexual attraction, Havelock Ellis

Introduction

Feminist approaches to evolutionary psychology have generally focused on various ways by which one can model women's active contribution to the dynamics of human survival and reproduction processes via the mechanism of natural selection (Durante, Li, & Haselton, 2008; Fisher, Garcia, & Sokol Chang, 2013). These theoretical approaches have no doubt ushered in new insights that are much needed in comparison to an over-focus on male behavior in general and the implications of male dominance in a variety of behavioral domains (see Eagly & Wood, 2011). Nonetheless, many of these feminist positions still look for differences between men and women, and cast the focus on female behavior as the feminist element being advanced. Consequently, research exploring the possibility that there could be important similarities that men and women have within psychological processes that intersect with the larger evolutionary psychology tenets is underrepresented. Hyde (2005) advanced a feminist position within psychology that she termed the *gender similarities hypothesis*. This position seeks to determine empirically whether women and men show similarity to each other on measures of psychological interest as a way to glean knowledge—in contrast to

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theorizing that begins from a fundamental difference expectation for these groups. Research in the vein of between-groups similarity in general is underrepresented in evolutionary psychology (Pedersen, Putcha-Bhagavatula, & Miller, 2011; Tate, 2013).

Supporting the foregoing statement, some evolutionary psychologists explicitly state that similarities between women and men should only be found on psychological and behavioral predilections that have no direct bearing on sexual behavior relevant to reproduction (e.g., cognitive abilities) since the domain of reproduction is where these theorists locate sex differences (Buss & Schmitt, 2011). That theoretical position might cast any similarities between women and men in sexual domains as either apocrypha or as not the purview of that version of evolutionary psychology. Yet, there are ways to model between-group similarities that contribute to observable individual differences from an evolutionary psychology perspective in the domain of human sexual behavior (Tate, 2011, 2013). It is also worth noting that these similarity positions are not yet well-documented and distributed in evolutionary psychology thinking. This letter therefore seeks to establish part of this documentation and distribution through a brief discussion of central issues to feminist evolutionary psychology theorizing about sexual orientation. To initiate this discourse, this letter addresses three topics. First, I avail the reader of current intersectionality work in academic feminism. Second, I present the existing work on evolutionary psychology and sexual orientation and show that the existing assumptions and conclusions marginalize non-heterosexual experiences. Third, I use an intersectional feminist approach to show that a non-marginalizing evolutionary psychological perspective on sexual orientation is possible.

Intersectionality Feminism in Psychological Science

Feminism is consistently defined by most scholars as a simultaneous focus on similarities and differences within and across gender groups (Cole, 2009; Davis, 2008; Staunes, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006). From this definition, both difference-based and similarity-based feminist approaches have developed within psychology (Eagly & Wood, 2011). The difference feminism approach investigates the origins of psychological differences between women and men. Specifically, difference feminism probes whether observable differences between gender groups are actually the result of fundamentally different processes at the level of immutable biological factors that simply unfold in this manner, or whether they are the result of ultimately malleable (even if routinized) environmental, social, and/or cultural influences—with the biological level possibly providing the basis of similarity if the other processes were controlled, removed, or otherwise taken into account (Eagly & Wood, 1999, 2011, 2013). Similarity feminism (Hyde, 2005) suggests that the lack of difference between women and men might also be a useful focus for psychological science to the extent that it reveals or points toward processes that might be based on the same physiological, genetic, and ultimately evolutionary biological factors.

Moreover, intersectional feminist approaches to science seek to advance all historically marginalized groups, which allows scholars to extend feminist analyses to discussions of racism, social class, and sexual orientation (Cronin & King, 2010; Davis, 2008; Staunes, 2003; Yuval-Davis, 2006) because these experiences also intersect with gender. For the purposes of this letter, only sexual orientation will be considered. The central argument that is fully developed below is that an intersectional feminist approach would usefully characterize evolutionary investigations of sexual orientation. Because

feminism can flexibly focus on fundamental similarity and fundamental difference, either approach could be applied to any intersectional discussion by extension. Below, I develop a fundamental similarity position at the genetic level across sexual orientation groups that fits all sexual orientations into an evolutionary psychology framework.

An Existing Approach to Sexual Orientation in Evolutionary Psychology

One existing approach within evolutionary psychology considers non-heterosexual orientation to be a paradox from their standpoint (Confer, Easton, Fleischman, Goetz, Lewis, Perilloux, & Buss, 2010; Perilloux, Lewis, Goetz, Fleischman, Easton, Confer, & Buss, 2010; Winegard, Bailey, Oxford, & Geary, 2010). Yet, this position relies on the least sophisticated approach to evolutionary psychology found in the style of *sexual strategies theory* (SST; Buss & Schmitt, 1993, 2011). “Sophisticated” is meant to be descriptive—not evaluative—and the lack of sophistication for SST comes in three major areas. One, SST-style reasoning about evolutionary psychology assumes the least complex state of human genetic sexual differences (Tate, 2011)—in which only two chromosomal sexes (XX and XY) are presumed to exist, even while human genetics studies show at least six major chromosomal sex groupings exist (Nielsen & Wolhert, 1991; Tate, 2011, 2012). Further, while these chromosomal arrangements have predictable influences on androgens *in utero*, there is not a perfectly predictable relationship, which allows for additional, non-chromosomal influences on genital anatomy development and consequently sex-typing at birth—allowing, for example, individuals with XX chromosomal make-ups to be assigned to the category of male at birth (Hines, 2004). Two, SST does not formally (or informally) test alternative, non-genetic explanations for their findings in the specific research domains of: (a) jealousy (Harris, 2003), (b) facial preferences (Harris, 2011), (c) desired qualities in mates (Kasser & Sharma, 1999; Zentner & Mitura, 2012), (d) desired number of sexual partners (Pedersen, Miller, Putcha-Bhagavatula, & Yang, 2002; Tate, 2011), or, (e) against predictions from a competitor account, *attachment fertility theory*, (Pedersen et al., 2011)—to name only a few domains. This lack of testing alternative explanations makes SST a theory that lacks scientific rigor in its present form (Tate, 2013). Three, SST relies on a philosophy of science understanding that is internally inconsistent and demonstrably inaccurate (Tate, 2013). Yet, as Tate (2013) argues, these three SST deficiencies are ultimately correctable in ways that she outlines.

Gender and Sexual Orientation Intersections: Parallel Structure in Arguments for Individual Difference Thinking

Both gender and sexual orientation are considered to be individual differences in psychology—or an intraspecies differentiation that results in some individuals having different outcomes as compared to others. Considering gender groupings, one can attempt to locate the individual difference at the level of human sex chromosome differences. As developed above, the assertion that there are only two types of human sex chromosome groupings (XX and XY pairs) is erroneous (Hines, 2004; Nielsen & Wolhert, 1991; Penke, 2010; Tate, 2011), yet some evolutionary psychology researchers nevertheless proceed from the acknowledgement that the two-group system comprises the numerical majority of humans (Penke, 2010; cf. Buss & Schmitt, 2011, p. 775). In this way, current evolutionary psychology theorizing can be described as employing *two-group-difference-*

thinking, in which two genetically different groups are posited to exist and that the important psychological differences between the groups arise as a result of evolutionary pressures that can be differentially experienced and differentially codified in the genes (Penke, 2010). While there is, at this point in time, no convincing demonstration that human sexual orientation groups are discriminable based on minute genetic differences or clusters of genetic differences, one might consider the possibility that a similar two-group-difference-thinking—namely, heterosexual versus homosexual—could apply to considerations of sexual orientation by some evolutionary psychology positions. This thinking style is basically the one employed in the Confer et al. (2010) and Winegard et al. (2010) discussions of sexual orientation as neatly divided into heterosexuality and homosexuality from an SST-inspired evolutionary psychology viewpoint. These discussions showcase the same underlying reasoning: (a) that there are two groups worth studying (i.e., heterosexual and homosexual—marginalizing bisexuality and other sexual orientations); (b) that these groups differ in a genetic manner that produces these groupings as such; and (c) that these groupings are subject to evolutionary processes that promote at least the survival if not reproduction of these groups. With cisgender homosexual men and women, there is, of course, no expectation that any sexual contact between same gender individuals results in reproduction. This reasoning led Confer et al. (2010) to describe homosexual orientation as “the Darwinian Paradox” (p. 122).

Toward an Inclusive Evolutionary Psychology of Sexual Orientation

A feminist evolutionary psychology position on sexual orientation was briefly offered by Tate and Ledbetter (2010) in response to the Confer et al. (2010) “Darwin paradox” perspective. Tate and Ledbetter’s (2010) *anthroposexual attraction theory* meets the criteria described above for a feminist approach insofar as these authors attempted to describe historically marginalized groups in a manner that is not dismissive or further marginalizing, and, moreover, attempted to provide a contributive role for the groups in the larger evolutionary space. To accomplish this, Tate and Ledbetter (2010) argued that there might be a fundamental similarity across all sexual orientation groups—namely, initial conspecific attraction that is further differentiated by experiential and developmental factors into the modern understandings of heterosexuality, homosexuality, and bisexuality. Such argumentation is also consistent with early sexology interpretations of Darwin’s views on evolutionary theory. As Tate and Ledbetter acknowledge, Havelock Ellis (1905) explicitly argued for the concept of *latent bisexuality* as a characterization of human psychosexual development that was completely consistent with evolutionary theory. Ellis (1905) wrote: “the conception of latent bisexuality, independent of homosexuality, was developed from the purely scientific side (by Darwin and the evolutionists generally)” (p. 314). Ellis (1905) also argued that, using the scientific understandings of his time, the concept of latent bisexuality in humans was well rooted in the scientific understanding that would later be called the *homology* of genital anatomy development, as follows: “At an early stage of development the sexes are indistinguishable, and throughout the life traces of this early community of sex remain” (p. 310). This was Ellis’s basis for arguing that sexual orientation might have a common starting point to the extent that human genital development is undifferentiated for the first 12 weeks of *in utero* development. Work since that time has shown that anatomical development of the genitals is separable from the underlying chromosomal makeup of an individual (Hines, 2004).

One might reasonably assume that Tate and Ledbetter's (2010) anthroposexual attraction theory is endorsing a position more (descriptively) sophisticated than the one Ellis described owing to the advances in the understanding of human biological development since the 1900s. Nevertheless, the two positions are likely united in that they are describable as feminist approaches by modern language. Specifically, each position showcases that a similarity-based feminist approach can be used to characterize all sexual orientations—however rare this perspective is within modern evolutionary psychology theorizing at the present moment. The next section makes a case for the usefulness of this similarity-based feminist approach to sexual orientation with an expansion of anthroposexual attraction theory as the example.

Foundational Concepts for Inclusive Sexual Orientation Theorizing

As noted above, there is historical and current precedent to develop a similarity-based feminist approach to evolutionary psychology theorizing about sexual orientation that is inclusive of the range of sexual orientations that humans experience. This section details how scholars might usefully develop positions within this approach by focusing on two important parts of evolutionary theory more broadly: (a) comparative insights regarding human sexual behavior, and (b) selection dynamics. Each is discussed in turn using anthroposexual attraction theory as an example of these feminist insights at work.

Comparative Insights Regarding Human Sexual Behavior

As some authors have noted, humans are among a small number of species, which include bonobos—humans' closest genetic relatives—that routinely have what has been termed non-reproductive or social sex (De la Garza-Mercer, 2007; Taylor, 2007). Even though there have been particular difficulties with definitions of homosexual sexual behavior in reference to species other than humans (Bailey & Zuk, 2008; Jordan-Young, 2010), it seems inarguable that human sexual behavior does feature consistent, replicable, and desired contact with conspecifics who have the same genital anatomies (cf. Bailey & Zuk, 2008). Additionally, humans (along with bonobos) are one of the few species that have routine sexual contact outside the ovulatory cycle. Both of these facts suggest that there is something unique about human sexual dynamics and practices that sets humans apart from many other animals in a similar way that tool use and culture set humans apart from many other animals. Though admittedly not the only characterization, this comparative uniqueness of human sexual activity might be seen as the result of some selective pressure that humans experienced that most other animals did not. In this way, non-reproductive sexual activity may be the descriptive norm for the human species rather than a special exception to a larger evolutionary rule. Thus, one way to interpret the Ellis (1905) statement that the "evolutionists in general" allow for latent bisexuality is that so long as humans have conspecific sexual attraction, some types of sexual activity will presumably result in reproduction—which allows for evolution to continue. The explicit assumption of anthroposexual attraction theory is the same: if humans are attracted to conspecifics, some types of interpersonal sexual contact would allow for reproduction, and thus continued evolution for the species.

Dynamics of Selection

Interestingly, both Ellis's (1905) arguments and anthroposexual attraction theory (Tate & Ledbetter, 2010) are agnostic with respect to whether attraction dynamics follow a group selection or individual selection model within broader evolutionary theory. In a response to Tate and Ledbetter's (2010) arguments, Perilloux et al. (2010) ascribed a group selection model to Tate and Ledbetter's descriptive statement that reproduction needs to happen at some level for continued evolution. In so doing, Perilloux et al. appear to fall into what Wilson and Sober (1994) describe as the "bogey man" understanding of group selection—a rhetorical, rather than substantive, device used to demean certain evolutionary positions. Below, I articulate the argument for anthroposexual attraction from individual selection.

Descriptively, the more preferred way of viewing evolutionary processes as they relate to behavior has been individual-level selection or individual selection (see Wilson & Sober, 1994). The main tenet of individual selection is that each organism inherits traits that are relevant to the selective pressures experienced on its genetic makeup. This statement allows for the idea that there can be differential selective pressures on individuals within the same species (Penke, 2010). Anthroposexual attraction is consistent with individual selection in the following way: as noted above, if humans and close relative species (e.g., bonobos) experienced selective pressures that resulted in a generalized conspecific attraction, then this information could be coded at the individual organism level. Like Ellis's (1905) statements, anthroposexual attraction theory is amenable to the idea that hormones or other physiological processes might developmentally "solidify" an individual's sexual attraction and behavioral predilections toward those of the same and other gender groups to different degrees across persons. However, the genetic and heritable predilection may be for conspecific attraction in a relatively uniform manner. These two statements are compatible logically as well as from the standpoint of developmental biology. Moreover, while Perilloux et al. (2010) state that "heterosexual orientation is highly canalized in humans, characteristic of more than 95% of people" (p. 932), the statement is more accurately conveyed as 95% of people *report* a heterosexual identity—which is the point that Tate and Ledbetter (2010) actually made. Sexual orientation is known to be a multidimensional phenomenon, with constituents of identity, categorization, behavior, desires, and feelings (Kirk, Bailey, Dunne, & Martin, 2000; Diamond, 1993; Kinsey, Pomery, & Martin, 1948; Kinsey, Pomery, Martin, & Gebhard, 1953). Thus, it is inaccurate to describe heterosexual orientation as characteristic of more than 95% of people—as Perilloux et al. (2010) did—based on the acknowledged imprecision when assessing the multidimensional referents listed above. Importantly, no one denies the difficulty that anthroposexual attraction theory has in describing the developmental components that would result in routine reports of any *sexual identity*—heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual, or others—and profound asymmetries in their reports in the United States or any national culture. Nonetheless, scholars are advised to be more precise in their terminology and referents when critiquing such positions. Criticisms notwithstanding, with its fundamental genetic similarity perspective, anthroposexual attraction theory might be one of the better candidate explanations for how men could have engaged in bisexual behavior within the ancient Greek aristocracy (see Ellis, 1905, p. 314, for a similar argument)—a social stratum within the larger society, not a genetically different group—or how men can engage in sexual contact with men for spiritual and cosmological reasons (e.g., exchange

of life force) while also engaging in sexual contact with women only for reproduction in Sambia culture in Papua New Guinea (Herdt, 1987), to name two examples. An approach that relies too heavily on the notion that specific directions of sexual desire, attraction, or behavior as sexual orientation are hard-wired predilections in service of reproduction have a difficult time accounting for such sexual behaviors within the human species in the past and contemporaneously. Anthroposexual attraction theory, by contrast, can accommodate such phenomena with the supposition that humans might have an attraction to other humans in a manner that is fundamentally similar across persons at the beginning of individual development—and one that features behavioral flexibility throughout the lifespan—even while some forms of sexual contact in later life will result in reproduction. Moreover, this supposition allows anthroposexual attraction theory to also account for the fact that some individuals will “solidify” their sexual identities at different time courses (cf. Diamond, 2003, 2008). It is also true that any other position that might be considered generally consistent with Ellis’s (1905) meaning of latent bisexuality could account for these data as well.

Conclusions

This letter has detailed one feminist view of how scholars and researchers might characterize what psychologists generally refer to as sexual orientation. As developed above, an approach that focuses on fundamental similarity between or across sexual orientation groups specifically allows for the development of individual differences so long as those individual differences are amenable to developmental processes that involve non-genetic sources (cf. Matsumoto & Willingham, 2009; Roisman & Fraley, 2006; Tate, 2013). Anthroposexual attraction theory as outlined by Tate and Ledbetter (2010) is an existing attempt to initiate and develop this type of feminist view, and stands in contrast to existing views that posit and seek to identify fundamental differences between groups in a manner that treats these less common groups as “paradoxical” or otherwise marginalized (Confer et al., 2010; Winegard et al., 2010). Recall that the thematic motivation of this letter would also allow for feminist approaches that posited fundamental group differences—even at the genetic level—but that do marginalize or tokenize non-common experiences.

It is also important to state that while not yet sufficiently developed as a research theory, anthroposexual attraction theory (Tate & Ledbetter, 2010) and other theories of sexual orientation that come from feminist motivations should be viewed as necessary foils to any theories of sexual orientation that come from non-feminist perspectives. In the history of science, theoretical foils have been useful ways by which to advance the field’s understanding of a phenomenon. Take, for example, Tycho Brahe’s heliocentric-geocentric universe theory in which the sun and moon were purported to orbit the Earth, and the other planets to orbit the sun (Blair, 1990). Of course, later evidence disproved the heliocentric-geocentric universe description; yet, the importance of this description was to challenge the heliocentric account to demonstrate how and why the heliocentric-geocentric description was incorrect. Even if another, non-feminist approach to characterizing sexual orientation is ultimately one that accounts for the observations better than a feminist approach, the latter will be a helpful tool in detailing exactly how and why the other approach is preferred. Likewise, if a feminist approach to characterizing the fundamental building blocks of sexual orientation turns out to be the best explanation for the observed patterns, this process of discovery will benefit

immeasurably from contrasting it with other, non-feminist approaches. In any case, it might be time for evolutionary psychology to benefit from the philosophy of science methods of our sibling sciences.

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