

Is sexual promiscuity genetically endowed?

Philip Bitar

Version 2015-02-27

You have no doubt heard it said that male promiscuity promotes the production of offspring and, as a result, a male propensity for promiscuity must be genetically endowed. Furthermore, doesn't every male know that promiscuity is inherent in his sex drive?

These ideas are fallacious.

The first claim is the result of fallacious reasoning using a basic evolutionary argument. The second idea is the result of a failure to understand how the mind works. Here is a summary of the respective insights.

Evolutionary argument

Human children are dependent for the first 15-20 years of their life. As a result, the marriage of a child's parents provides for the physical, social, and educational needs of the child in preparing the child to live a productive life in their society. Accordingly, we can infer that this is the main reason why all human societies developed the institution of marriage.

Male promiscuity works against skillfully raising children by procreating children without regard to providing a nurturing environment for their upbringing. The result of this is youth who are not as well prepared to live a productive life and, instead, are more likely to behave unskillfully, unsocially, and unlawfully.

On evolutionary grounds, then, the argument should be that human society created the institution of marriage in order to enhance the survival of the species. So, as a result, a propensity for marital fidelity — rather than a propensity for promiscuity — may be genetically endowed because marital fidelity promotes the production of offspring who will pass on the parent genes in the long run.

However, there is no credible genetic mechanism for determining sexual preferences, so a propensity for marital fidelity cannot be genetically determined.

Understanding the mind

According to my model of the mind, there are four basic components of the mind:

Volitional, conscious unit

Automatic, unconscious unit

Sensory, input unit

Motor, output unit

The automatic unit continuously processes incoming sensory information and continuously issues outgoing motor commands in order to achieve the goals of the mind. The automatic unit performs these operations under the supervision of the volitional unit.

More specifically, the automatic unit compels us into all that we do, starting with getting out of bed in the morning. If the automatic unit did not provide an urge for us to get out of bed in the morning, we would just lie there. If the automatic unit did not provide urges to act, we would never do anything.

The role of the volitional unit is to supervise the activity of the automatic unit by focusing attention and by approving or disapproving urges to act from the automatic unit.

Urges of the automatic unit must be evaluated in terms of our goal tree. Early in life, urges of the automatic unit are associated only with low-level goals — goals to satisfy feelings like hunger, thirst, and the desire for physical comfort. But as our volitional unit trains our automatic unit to pursue high-level goals, we develop character. Early in life, this training is schooled by our parents and other caretakers, and as we grow older, such training continues in school, in church, and in other settings. Accordingly, we develop character in sexual relations by training our automatic unit to pursue high-level goals in sexual relations.

Thus, the idea that our sex drive is inherently promiscuous is mistaken. It is the role of our automatic unit to provide urges so that we will act, but it is the role of our volitional unit to train our automatic unit in achieving the high-level goals of our mind so that we will put the urges of our automatic unit to productive use.

The idea that promiscuity is inherent in sexual arousal is similar to the idea that indiscriminate eating is inherent in hunger. Hunger and sexual arousal merely constitute psychological awareness of body states. It is the responsibility of our mind to respond to such awareness in a manner that realizes our high-level goals. Indiscriminate eating is one way to respond to hunger, and promiscuity is one way to respond to sexual arousal, but such responses will not achieve the high-level goals of human nature.

Training our automatic unit to pursue high-level goals constitutes character development. This is how we should deal with all urges, including urges to eat and urges to engage in sexual activity.

Meeting format

We'll cover the foregoing material interactively, discussing the concepts as we proceed.