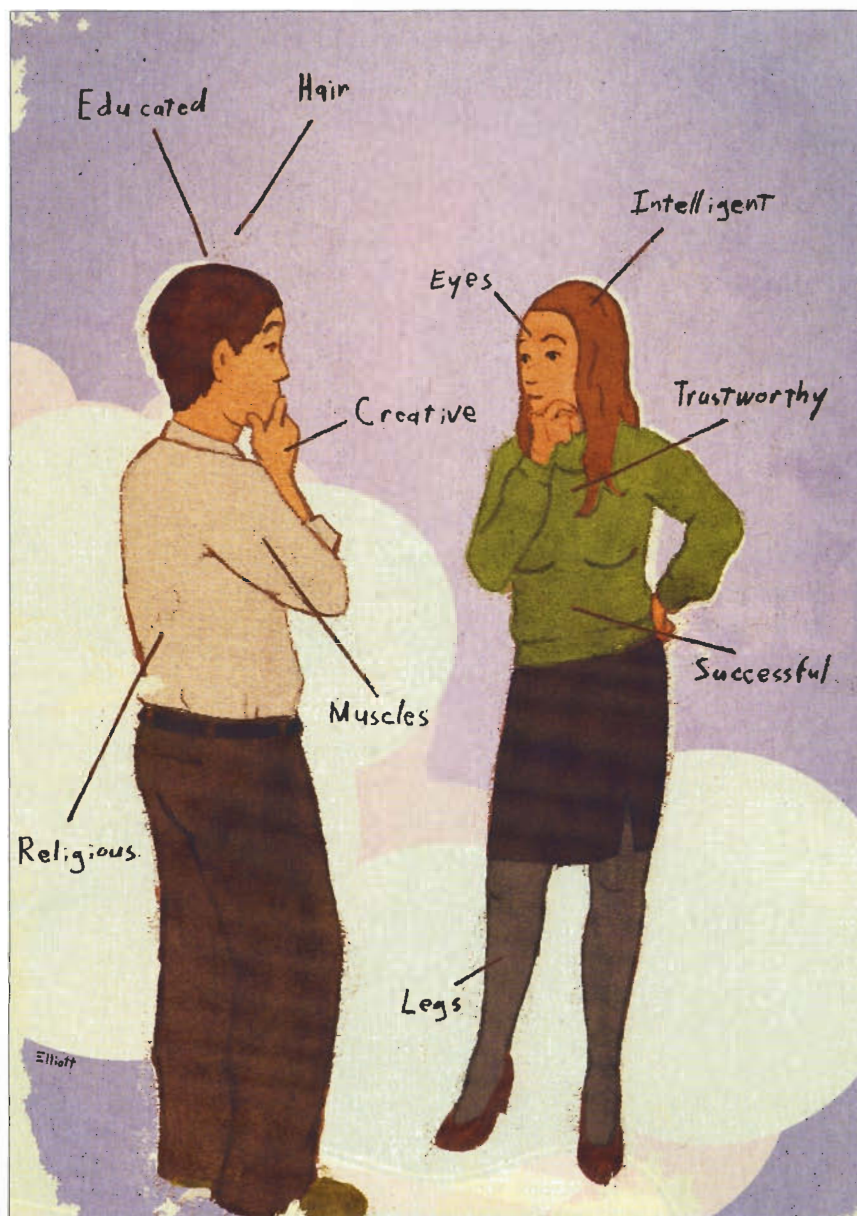

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The Mating Game

According to evolutionary psychologists, love is far from blind BY JULIA M. KLEIN

When Robert Kurzban, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania, saw an advertisement for a service called HurryDate, which promised an evening of 25 three-minute dates, he was intrigued, but not because he was looking for love. Kurzban called Adele Testani, the company's president, and told her: "I'm a scientist. I want to do research on what people do in these environments. Can I have your data?" Curious about what Kurzban might find, Testani agreed.

HurryDate surveys customers about their background, including income, race, and religion. Kurzban and his colleague, Jason Weeden, added questions of their own, grilling willing participants about their attractiveness, values, and desire for children. Then the two men assessed the partner choices that HurryDaters made — and tried to make theoretical sense of it all.

Their fundamental questions: Did participants select the people most like themselves? Or did most of them prize similar traits — such as appearance or high income — and try to get the best deal they could in the mating market?

What Kurzban and Weeden discovered was that both men and women chose their dates on the basis of "generally agreed-upon mate values." But another finding surprised them even more: Both sexes relied mainly on physical attractiveness, largely disregarding factors such as income and social status. "The main story is that at HurryDate events," Weeden says, "all the guys are looking for skinny, young women, and all the women are looking for tall, well-built, young guys."

Welcome to the world of evolutionary psychology, an influential new science that takes a rather cool view of our moonlight and champagne illusions. Instead, evolutionary scientists say there is a "mating market," where men and women unconsciously assess each other's value in reproductive terms — and choose their partners accordingly, and that men and women today continue to be governed by sexual strategies

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> "Falling in love is basically a process where both sides feel they're getting a good deal."

that originated millions of years ago.

"People who are in love say things that are silly," says Weeden, a research associate in psychology at the University of Pennsylvania. "If you ask most people why they're in love with the person they're in love with, they will talk a lot about what a special person they are and how comfortable they feel around them. They won't say, 'This is someone of my own race and educational background who shares my plans about future children and also fits certain criteria of physical attractiveness.'"

And yet, Weeden says, "Those are the things that will really predict who ends up with whom."

Norman P. Li, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin, puts it a little differently (but no more romantically). "Falling in love," he says, "is basically a process where both sides feel they're getting a good deal."

These researchers are working at the cutting edge of the field, employing economic concepts to illuminate the science of love. Yet other evolutionary psychologists are using the Darwinian paradigm to recast conventional wisdom in disciplines such as biology, anthropology, history, and even literature.

"Human beings are evolved. That affects what they find important, what they strive for, how they behave," says Randy Thornhill, distinguished professor of biology at the University of New Mexico. "Without that kind of knowledge, you're only going to be able to superficially understand what they're up to."

Such ideological certainty infuriates some critics. Jaak Panksepp, a neuroscientist at Falk Center for Molecular Therapeutics at Northwestern University, chides evolutionary psychologists for ignoring recent neurological findings about both human and mammalian brains. Others see evolutionary psychology as simplistic in its view of human nature. Anne Fausto-Sterling, professor of biology and gender studies at Brown University, argues that it either "leaves out the socioeconomic, cultural world" or "strips it down in ways that impoverish potential understanding of human behavior."

Not so, says Kurzban. "Evolutionary psychology rejects the distinction between biology on the one hand and culture on the other hand," he says. "Let's stop talking about nature versus nurture, and let's start talking about the interaction between the developing organism and the context of its environment."

First popularized by Robert Wright's 1994 book *The Moral Animal: Why We Are the Way We Are*, evolutionary psychology has its roots in sociobiology, the controversial Darwinian study of human behavior pioneered by Harvard biologist E.O. Wilson in the mid-1970s. It has since given birth, so to speak, to two related fields. Human behavioral ecologists concern themselves with actual reproductive behavior. Evolutionary psychologists focus on what John Tooby and Leda Cosmides have called "the adapted mind" — the psychological mechanisms that have evolved to promote survival and reproduction.

Evolutionary psychologists also maintain that the behavior of men and women today is influenced by sexual strategies developed hundreds of thousands of years ago, in the so-called Era of Evolutionary Adaptiveness. Because our male ancestors were easily able to sire numerous children at little cost to their fitness, the theory asserts, they were inclined to short-term mating with multiple partners. In choosing mates, they gravitated toward youth and physical attractiveness — markers of fertility and health. By contrast, females, for whom conception meant pregnancy and the need to care for a child, were more choosy, searching for long-term commitments from males with the resources and willingness to invest in them and their offspring.

Support for this theory came from a landmark 1980s study spearheaded by psychologist David M. Buss and involving 34 cultures and 10,047 individuals. Buss, now professor of psychology at the University of Texas at Austin and author of *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating* (1994; revised in 2003), found marked similarities across cultures, including a female preference for men with resources and status that persisted even when the women had considerable resources of their own. Overall, women valued financial resources in a mate twice as much as men did.

"Up until that time, everyone believed that these things were very tethered to individual cultures, and that cultures were infinitely

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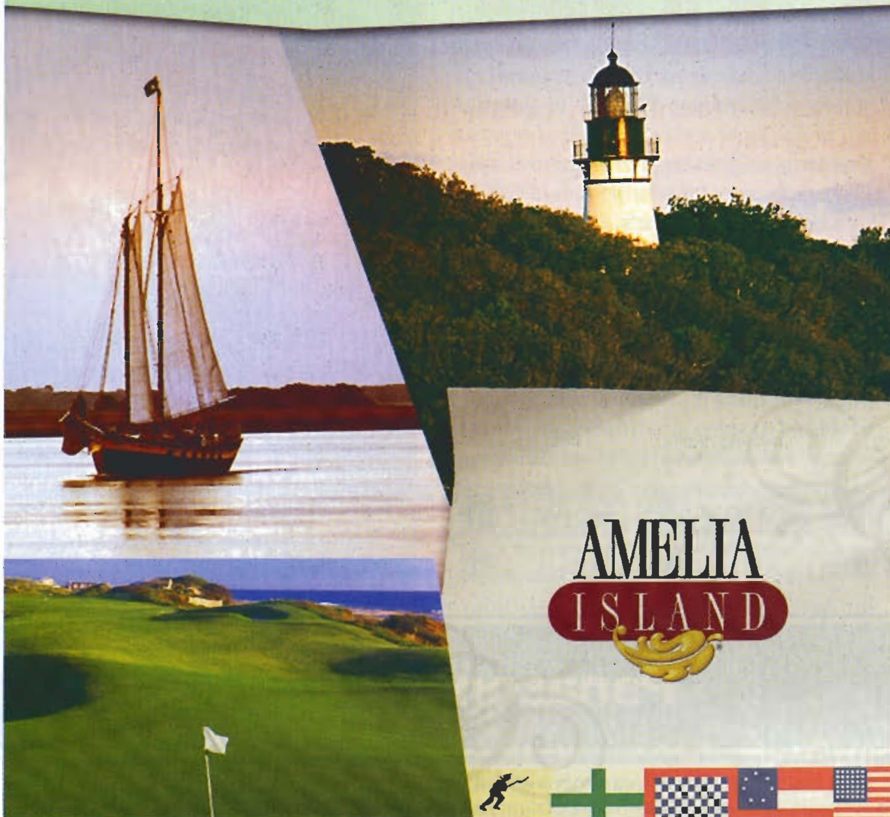

variable, and that there were no universals," Buss says. These findings "challenged the mainstream social science way of thinking."

But, as Buss notes, the differences between men and women have turned out to be less stark than once supposed. Women, for example, aren't quite as monogamous as their partners might wish. They, too, sometimes pursue short-term mating strategies. Thornhill says he has found that some women, in an unconscious bid for better genes, will choose "extra-pair copulation" — that is, have affairs — with men who are more attractive (though perhaps less likely to commit) than their long-term mates.

In short-term relationships, physical attractiveness is a priority for women, just as it is for men. This is one conclusion reached by U.T.'s Li and Douglas T. Kenrick, a professor of psychology at Arizona State University, in a paper slated for publication later this year in the *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

Seeking to draw a distinction between "luxuries" and "necessities," the researchers gave both men and women varied "mating budgets." In a series of tests, they asked them to construct an ideal mate, using such qualities as looks, social status, creativity, and kindness. For one-night stands and affair partners, both women and men sought physical attractiveness above all else.

For long-term mates, the expected sex differences emerged: Men kept preferring attractiveness, and women opted for social status, as well as warmth and trustworthiness. But after their minimum requirements for these necessities were met, both sexes chose well-rounded partners over those with the very best looks or the highest status. In other words, Li says, "Men are not all complete pigs, and women are not all complete gold diggers."

This, he says, makes sound evolutionary sense. After all, to father a child, "you don't need the most beautiful woman in the world." At the same time, women "don't need the richest man in the world to guarantee reproductive success. You just need somebody who's not a bum, basically."

In practice, Li says, people's "budgets" in the mating market are determined by what they themselves have to offer. "So a guy who is extremely high-status or very wealthy can trade up for a more physically attractive partner," he says. And "women trying to make themselves more physically attractive so they can get a higher-quality mate are not completely misguided."

It is also true, Li says, that very smart

and successful women will have a harder time finding partners. "It seems that men want somebody intelligent enough so that they can recognize the man's brilliance," he says, "but not necessarily enough to challenge them — or so smart that they find someone else more interesting."

Not all evolutionary psychologists agree on how "sexual selection" actually works. Geoffrey Miller, for example, de-emphasizes gender differences in mate choice and suggests that the human mind evolved — like the elaborate peacock's tail — primarily as a way of attracting partners.

Miller's 2000 book *The Mating Mind: How Sexual Choice Shaped the Evolution of Human Nature* argues that traits such as musical and artistic ability have nothing to do with survival per se and instead make *both* men and women more desirable to potential mates. For Miller, an assistant professor of psychology at the University of New Mexico, intellect and creativity are, well, sexy.

"Guys are not picky about short-term mating, which is why we don't read about IQ scores in *Penthouse* magazine," Miller says. But when it comes to long-term relationships, "there's good evidence that guys are as picky as women about the mental traits of partners," he says. "Most bright guys who are successful are really keen on [finding] bright women who are their social and intellectual equals."

Laura L. Betzig, author of *Despotism and Differential Reproduction: A Darwinian View of History* (1986), says she considers Miller "very clever — but wrong." Betzig, whose specialty is investigating the links between power and mating in human societies, has found that rich, powerful men have consistently produced high numbers of offspring. In a paper published in August in the online journal *Evolutionary Psychology*, Betzig notes that this pattern holds even in the Bible, with Old Testament patriarchs, judges, and kings often having multiple wives and concubines and fathering more children than men of lower rank.

Evolutionary psychologists have applied their ideas to other literary classics as well. In *Madame Bovary's Ovaries: A Darwinian Look at Literature* (2005), biologist David P. Barash and his daughter, Nanelle R. Barash, dub novelist Jane Austen "the poet laureate of female choice," tie Othello's murderous jealousy to the age-old struggle by men to ensure their paternity, and see Madame Bovary as a woman in search of better genes. David Barash argues that these literary characters reaffirm our understanding of human nature. "We are all intuitive biologists," he says.

Which brings us back to the nature of romance. Is it really possible to analyze and quantify the personal chemistry that makes hearts flutter, inspires courtship, and seals matrimonial bonds?

"Much of the data suggest there's competition for the qualities that are most desirable in mates," says Kurzban, who is still puzzling over the HurryDate results. "It's not going to fit with our notions that there's some magic that works idiosyncratically." Of course, he adds, with just a touch of humility: "That's not to say that we understand everything about love."

Julia M. Klein is a cultural reporter and critic in Philadelphia who writes for *The New York Times*, *Mother Jones*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and other publications.