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New collection of articles unpacks the importance of culture in the evolution of gendered conflict

The struggle for power between women and men — the so-called battle of the sexes — is as complex as it is longstanding. But can theory initially developed to explain animal behavior also help us understand how conflict is navigated across human cultures?

That's the focus of a [new collection](#) of research papers in the journal *Evolutionary Human Sciences*, co-edited by [David Lawson](#), a UC Santa Barbara associate professor in the Department of Anthropology.

The volume brings together social scientists studying the interplay of culture and gender relations across the world, including: the role of bride wealth in shaping women's autonomy in Ghana; the consequences of arranged and early marriage in Nepal, Bangladesh and Tanzania; and the implications of polygyny, wherein a woman shares her husband with co-wives. The collection also addresses policy concerns, including gender divisions in household labor and the drivers of intimate partner violence.

The collection's opening article, "[Gendered Conflict in the Human Family](#)," spearheaded by Lawson, reviews controversies in the application of evolutionary thought to sex and gender, and maps out key priorities for research moving forward.

To mark the publication, The Current caught up with Lawson for some background on the project and its connections to his research.

The Current: What does sexual or gendered conflict mean in the context of this collection, and what are the differences in applying this framework to nonhumans and humans?

David Lawson: Sexual conflict theory was developed by biologists to better understand conflicts of interest between the sexes on matters such as whether a pair should mate and, if so, how to care for their offspring. These conflicts arise because mates are not genetically identical and because evolution can drive differing priorities for differing reproductive physiologies. In the face of conflict, each sex may evolve coercive and deceptive tactics to gain the upper hand.

Sexual conflict theory has provided insights into a range of complex behaviors across the animal kingdom, including males coercing females into sex, killing unrelated infants or preventing females from mating with others. Females have evolved their own strategies, including ways to confuse paternity or make it difficult for powerful males to monopolize mating opportunities.

Applying the framework to humans is not straightforward, primarily because we are a uniquely cultural species. This means that we must also understand the role of social learning and inherited customs, such as rules and expectations regulating marriage and residence. Adding further complexity, cultural practices are transmitted socially rather than genetically. Recognizing the importance of culture, we adopt the term “gendered conflict” rather than “sexual conflict” when talking about the evolution of conflict between women and men.

Your article discusses the damaging role of gender stereotypes in past research. Can you say more about this? What other biases must we be attentive to?

Ever since Darwin, evolutionary biologists looking at sex differences have been influenced by gender stereotypes, even when looking at nonhuman species. This influences science in a very real way, not least because it determines the type of questions we ask. For example, early research assumed that only males may benefit from mating with multiple partners in line with stereotypes of a relatively coy female

sexuality. We now know both sexes have incentives to seek out multiple partners, including outside of pair bonds.

We can plot a correlation between emergence of a more objective, evidence-based understanding of sex and gender, and the increased involvement of women in evolutionary anthropology. Scholars like Sarah Hrdy, Barbara Smuts and Monique Borgerhoff Mulder have had a huge impact, stimulating new insights into human sexuality, and how conflicts between women and men are navigated across different cultural contexts.

Other biases are also important. Evolutionary anthropologists collect data from around the world, but the vast majority of studies are led by researchers from North America and Europe, often with little involvement of researchers from relatively low and middle-income countries. This lack of representation may lead to less well appreciated forms of bias.

As you discuss in your piece, why is it important to achieve greater cultural diversity among researchers? As an editor of the collection, how did you tackle this issue?

It is important because it guards us against ethnocentrism — the tendency to judge other cultures by the standards of our own. For example, it is easy for the “foreign gaze” to make naive assumptions about cultural practices like bride wealth (resources transferred from the groom to bride’s family) or arranged marriage, and their impacts on women.

Moreover, we have a responsibility to ensure that when data is collected overseas that we disrupt traditions of “parasitic” or [“parachute”](#) research practice. In too many cases, foreign researchers, often coming from countries with colonial ties to the host nation, circumvent local researchers or fail to value and invest in local research capacity. Appropriate actions vary by context, but we need to be mindful of these issues and push for change.

As editors, we purposely invited submissions from research led by scholars from outside of North American and Europe, or where work is carried out in direct collaboration with host nation institutions or researchers. We also encouraged all contributors to consider their criteria for authorship, so as to make sure everyone involved in the research was appropriately recognized.

Many of the collected papers address global health policy. What are a few examples that could provide insight for policymakers?

The collection highlights the importance of context, warning against naive one-size-fits-all solutions for policymakers. For example, our research into [child marriage](#) (marriage under the age of 18) in Tanzania illustrates that while some girls are coerced into marriage by parents, other actively pursue marriage to gain social status and mitigate alternative risks to their wellbeing, like pre-marital child rearing. If adolescent girls themselves seek out marriage, we need to reconsider assumptions that early marriage contradicts female agency.

Another insight is that we cannot consider potentially harmful cultural practices in isolation. For example, while bride wealth transfers have been linked to restricted female autonomy, when considered as part of a wider patriarchal culture, these transfers also hold value to women as a means to legitimize marriage and choose appropriate spouses. Unsurprisingly then, women in bride wealth practicing communities often claim support for the custom.

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