Evolutionary explanations of human aggression based on infidelity and jealousy

Aggression in men has an adaptive value. Men are more likely to experience sexual jealousy because of their fear of **cuckoldry and** partners committing adultery. Because men are more prone to parental uncertainty, they risk unwittingly investing resources in children who aren't their own. Sexual jealousy and the aggression which it can cause, therefore, evolved to deter females from sexual infidelity and hence minimise the risk of cuckoldry.  
  
To do this, men have evolved aggressive **retention strategies** to deter mates from sexual infidelity. This includes direct guarding, in which a male is especially vigilant to their mate in order to restrict her sexual autonomy. Retention strategies can also include violence against the woman, such as various forms of domestic violence. In extreme cases, an unintended consequence of this evolutionary behaviour may be her death (uxoricide – wife killing).

As a consequence of sexual infidelity, aggressive acts such as sexual coercion have also evolved. Infidelity is seen to be a key predictor of partner violence. This violence can take many forms such as sexual coercion and violence towards pregnant partners.

Research by Shackelford et al. has supported the relationship between sexual jealousy, aggressive mate-retention strategies by males, and violence towards women. Using a survey method, male participants were assessed on how often they performed violent acts against their partners. Also, female participants were asked to answer corresponding questions concerning their partners’ use of male aggressive retention techniques. It was found that men’s use of retention techniques (such as direct guarding) was positively correlated with their violent scores and feelings of sexual jealousy. The results from the female-directed violence survey confirmed this trend, therefore providing support for jealousy resulting in aggressive behaviours*.*

However, Shackelford’s’s research may lack validity. Survey techniques have particular issues, especially when used in sensitive areas, such as violence against a spouse. Participants may not always give truthful answers due to the social desirability bias – a tendency to respond in a way that will be viewed favourably by others. Therefore, undesirable behaviour (such as female-directed violence) may be under-reported when using surveys. Also participants may not want to admit to acts of infidelity through fear of consequences.

A positive of research, such as Shackleford, and knowledge of mate retention strategies is that they can have a practical application. Family members and friends can be taught how to recognise different mate retertion strategies and this will alert them of potential violence in relationships.

Research into sexual jealousy and infidelity also poses ethical problems. Females may have to relive aggressive acts which may cause distress or worry. For males, when asked about their mate retention strategies, they may not feel comfortable confessing all of their violent acts. It can also cause a moral dilemma for the researcher if they know that someone is at risk of domestic violence.

Takahashhi et al. supports the evolutionary explanation of human aggression linked to sexual jealousy. In their study they found the neural response to imagined scenes depicting sexual infidelity and emotional jealousy was different for men and women. Men showed greater activation in the amygdale and hypothalamus, which are areas of the brain associated with aggression. This shows that the male brain has evolved to respond more aggressively to sexual jealousy.

However this can’t explain individual differences, not all men respond to sexual infidelity with aggression. Therefore this study is not generalisable and their maybe other factors such as social influences affecting aggression in males.

Burch and Gallup’s study supports the hypothesis that a man is likely to inflict violence upon their pregnant partner when they suspect the child is not their own. They found that the frequency of violent acts towards their pregnant partner was double that directed to non-pregnant partners. These men were characterised as sexually jealous, which has evolved to prevent infidelity by women and reduce the risk of cuckoldry.

Most research into infidelity has focused solely on men’s mate retention strategies and men’s violence against women, and therefore suffers from gender bias. However, women also engage inmate retention tactics and sometimes behave violently towards their partners. Research has found that women initiate and carry out physical assault on their partners as often as men do. A possible reason for female aggression being under researched is that they exhibit emotional jealousy instead of sexual jealousy and perhaps have different mate retention strategies which are more passive aggressive. Additionally men are less likely to come forward if they are a victim of domestic abuse which can also explain why studies are mainly focused on male aggression towards women.

However the evolutionary explanation can be questioned through the nature v nurture debate. Evolutionary explanations argue that behaviour has evolved through gene selection and therefore is biological. If jealousy was an evolved response to female infidelity and is determined by genes, all males should be violent to their partners. Therefore the Social Learning Theory (nurture) may be an alternative explanation. If a man grew up with a violent role model, they learn through observing them, thus the aggressive acts towards their pregnant partner. However the evolutionary explanations are limited as they are too simplistic.