



# SEX ON THE BRAIN

*What's "lucky in love" got to do with it? Humans play the mating game strategically, relying on mental aptitudes designed by evolution* BY WING SZE TANG

**DECODING THE ALLURE OF** nice guys vs. bad boys; the success rates of assorted pickup lines; and the chaste fate of being doomed to the "friend zone"—it sounds like well-chewed rom-com fodder, but they're just a few areas of serious interest for psychologists Glenn Geher and Scott Barry Kaufman. In their new book, *Mating Intelligence Unleashed: The Role of the Mind in Sex, Dating, and Love* (Oxford University Press, \$30), the two delve deeply into scholarly research on the sometimes unconscious mental abilities that guide how humans woo and choose (or lose) partners.

When we hook up—for a night or for life—it's not because of Cupid's arbitrary bow. What makes a match is a certain kind of brain-power shaped by evolution. Human mating patterns are "strategic, predictable (i.e. not random), and

largely designed by evolutionary forces to increase reproductive payout across future generations," the authors write. Our ancestors who succeeded at appearing attractive to the opposite sex (which is a skill as much as a genetically predetermined bonus for the good-looking), and those who astutely interpreted the physical and behavioural traits of prospective mates, were more apt to snag a top-notch partner and pass on their genes. Thankfully, Geher and Kaufman say, it's possible to override certain self-destructive instincts and sharpen our mating intelligence.

## **BEWARE "LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT"—NARCISSISTS HAVE NEAR-UNIVERSAL ALLURE.**

Reality TV dating competitions such as *The Bachelor* may seem like the last place to look for lessons in love, but they're "data sets just waiting to be

studied by people like us," Geher says by phone from the State University of New York at New Paltz, where he works as chair of psychology and director of evolutionary studies. "They're not completely 'ecologically valid'—they're special people and know they're being observed—but the things that happen do tell stories related to mating intelligence." Take, for instance, the appeal of narcissists (there's always at least one!): Studies show they make glowing first impressions, ranking more popular than non-narcissists. Little wonder, given that narcissists tend to be more physically attractive than average, and project charm, confidence and humour in spades.

Researchers have discovered "specific traits that seem universally attractive, and one of the most attractive traits is narcissism," explains Kaufman, adjunct assistant professor of psychology at New York University. Oftentimes the trait is initially perceived as extroversion, he adds, but when you ask the people to describe their personality, "they tend to tell you they like manipulating others—they have a lot of narcissistic traits." This personality is so adept at notching bedposts, there's an emerging theory that narcissism evolved 1.5 million years ago *for the very purpose* of short-term mating success. In the long-run, though, this type's aggressiveness and self-entitlement are a recipe for relationship dysfunction. "A guy who approaches you right away at a bar looks incredibly confident. We tend to think that's the perfect guy," says Kaufman, "but research shows they're more likely to not be a good mate, and I think that's a counter-intuitive finding."



### LACKING IN LOOKS? FUNNY IS SUPREMELY SEXY, TOO.

There's a reason singletons on Match.com almost universally profess a sense of humour: The trait is a form of creativity significantly correlated with IQ, making it an indicator of good genes (in science-speak: "low genetic mutational load")—immensely sexy. Indeed, more than 55 percent of the DNA in our species is expressed in the brain, Geher and Kaufman write, so it's "an organ telling of genetic quality like no other." Interestingly, while men aren't inherently funnier than women, they're more driven to show off their comedic skills on first encounter; "since on average women are the choosers," Kaufman explains. Research suggests women like men who make them laugh, whereas men prefer women who laugh at their jokes. (Humph.) A sense of humour also signals a bevy of other desirable qualities—playfulness, extroversion, warmth. The total package is so alluring that funniness is one of the most powerful courtship tools around, even if your physical features don't impress; some psychologists dub this the "Woody Allen effect." Careful, though: Narcissists can be witty, too—though Geher has a hunch they're more likely to use humour that deprecates others.

### WOMEN'S MATING PREFERENCES FLUCTUATE ACCORDING TO OVULATORY CYCLES.

"It might be kind of controversial, but the data is beyond compelling," Geher argues. "When women are close to peak ovulation, they engage in mating behaviours that seem to try to attract relatively physically attractive males." During the whisker-thin window of optimum pregnancy opportunity, women appear extra-intent on securing good genes—often signalled by evolutionarily successful looks: tall, masculine and muscular. But in low-fertility stages, they shift to favouring "good dad indicators"—such as the ability to offer resources and care, a long-term boon even if ideal genes are lacking.

Accordingly, women in their fertile phase act differently. "Pheromones kick in; [in research] they're rated as smelling more pleasant. They're more likely to touch, to initiate sex, to smile," Geher says. But what about women on the pill, which suppresses ovulation? One of his grad students, Rebecca Newmark, is looking into the intriguing question—with big implications for our species' future—of whether their mating preferences stray from evolutionary instincts. The data suggests they're much less likely to find "cads" (highly masculine, dominant, narcissistic males) attractive, and more likely to find "dads" (not as masculine, but more genuine about long-term fidelity, and more caring) attractive, says Geher. "Across many generations, we can envision a shift in the prevalence of these traits at the population level," he adds. Could this even mean the end of war? With rising hormonal contraceptive use, it is "very possible societal norms do become more peaceful," Newmark predicts.

### THE MATING WORLD IS FULL OF LIES AT EVERY TURN.

Honesty is oft touted as a relationship bedrock, yet it's deception that runs rampant in human mating—because sometimes it pays to lie, evolutionarily speaking. To gain an advantage, we fib to ourselves, or about our romantic rivals, or to our would-be mates. As Geher and Kaufman point out, this deceptiveness is at work when we convince ourselves we're more attractive than we really are; when we dis other women (and deflate their apparent worth); and even when we doll ourselves up with lipstick. With makeup, they note, a woman can fool admirers into thinking she's at peak ovulation. So since humans lie with abandon, much of mating intelligence relates to being able to cut through the BS—it's too costly to choose the wrong mate. This "deception detection" is what drives people to quiz their partners on where they went last night, or to email-snoop for hints of infidelity.

### YES, THE "FRIEND ZONE" DOES EXIST—FOR GOOD REASON.

Compared with other men, guys high in mating intelligence are more likely to have one-night stands with strangers, acquaintances *and* friends—a spread-the-genes tactic that makes evolutionary sense. In contrast, "women of higher mating intelligence were more likely than other women to have hookups with an acquaintance, but *not* with a stranger or a friend," says Geher. As the logic goes, for a woman, racking up flings with randoms would be an evolutionarily risky strategy since she could wind up shouldering the burden of parenthood solo. Likewise, because having male friends confers numerous benefits—including a social network and protection—once a woman mentally slots a guy into the "friend zone," a no-strings shag would "defeat much of the evolutionary purpose of that friendship." An acquaintance, however, falls into a sweet spot—lower risk, higher potential reward—especially if such a hookup uncovers a great mate keen on a long-term relationship, as most women (*and* most men) surreptitiously hope, researchers say.

### JERKS GET MORE ACTION, BUT NICE (THOUGH NOT OVERLY NICE) GUYS WIN IN THE END.

True, the archetypal bad boy tends to have more conquests, but it's not his aggressiveness that's so irresistible. It's assertiveness—a trait a nice guy can have, too. For long-term relationships, men and women seek the same things, with kindness ranking high. It's valued not just for the abstract contentment, but also its pragmatic payoff. "This person will be kind to you, and perhaps more importantly, to your shared offspring—which, from an evolutionary perspective, is more of a bottom line," says Geher. (Excessive niceness, however, tends to be a turnoff—a sign the would-be suitor may be less choosy and too available.) The sexiest of them all is the man with the magic combo of assertiveness *and* agreeableness—surely the scientific reason we swoon over Ryan Gosling. □