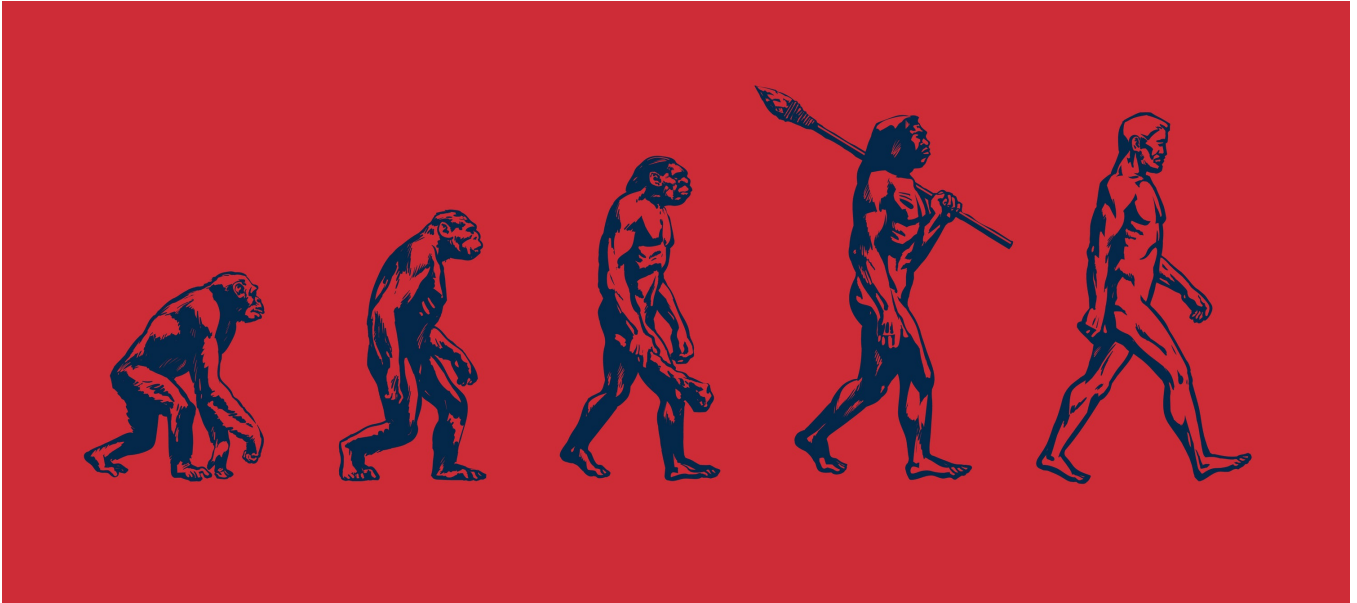


Why Jeffrey Epstein loved evolutionary psychology

And why evolutionary psychologists loved him right back.



When not abusing adolescent girls, Jeffrey Epstein enjoyed the company of powerful men. He cultivated relationships with businessmen and politicians like Bill Clinton and Donald Trump, but he also patronized influential scientists with prestigious academic positions whose company increased his own social capital. Scientists deemed brilliant by Epstein often returned the favor. Simple flattery of a wealthy man may explain why the neuroscientist and Nobel winner Richard Axel [described Epstein to New York Magazine](#) in 2007 as having an “extremely smart and probing” mind, and another Nobel winner for physiology and medicine, Gerald Edelman, five years earlier, [described Epstein as “extraordinary in his ability to pick up on quantitative relations.”](#) However, the praise was hardly universal. [Speaking to Mother Jones](#) in August of this year, Epstein friend Stuart Pivar described the billionaire pedophile as an intellectually lazy dilettante with a short attention span, prone to interrupting technical discussions at his dinner party with the question, “What does that got to do with pussy?”

Of all academic disciplines, evolutionary psychology has the most to do with pussy. In the last half of the 20th century, biologists and psychologists working in the related fields of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology claimed that natural selection could explain much, perhaps most, of the complexities of human behavior, from a male preference for polygamy to why women wear high heels. In scientific articles and popular books like *The Evolution of Desire: Strategies of Human Mating*, and *The Red Queen: Sex and the Evolution of Human Nature*, evolutionary psychologists claimed natural selection could explain vast swathes of human behavior. Male adultery, gendered differences in achievement, and sexual violence were among the phenomena described as the product of genes shaped by our evolutionary origins. It makes sense that Epstein was enamored with this area of science, the proponents of which are overwhelmingly white men, and we mustn't overlook those mens' complicity in the billionaire's abhorrent world.

Epstein provided lavish funding to a number of prominent academics whose work is relevant to evolutionary psychology, most notably the mathematical biologist Martin Nowak and the eccentric evolutionary biologist Robert Trivers, and was connected to others, like the psychologist and public intellectual Steven Pinker. Epstein's appeal to these scientists may have been nothing more than the allure of easy money unencumbered with the usual restrictions of a National Science Foundation grant. However, the explanations for human behavior developed in these scientists' work must have been appealing to a man of Epstein's proclivities. For example, Steven Pinker has described men as likely biologically predisposed to aggression, violent competition over women, and even rape, while evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller wrote that sexual selection, male-male competition, and mate choice can explain why men have dominated the "political, economic, and cultural life in every known society."

Of the scientists with substantial ties to Epstein, Robert Trivers is perhaps the most influential within his discipline. Trivers made his reputation with

a series of papers while a graduate student at Harvard that substantially shaped the development of sociobiology and evolutionary psychology. Papers in 1971 and 1972 described the evolution of altruism through reciprocal exchanges, and how differing degrees of parental investment between the sexes could explain mating behavior like desertion, adultery, and male sequestration of females to assure their sexual fidelity.

Because sperm is cheap but childbearing is costly, the reasoning goes, evolutionary psychologists building off of Trivers' work have extrapolated that males — including human men— achieve the greatest reproductive success through promiscuous mating with many females but low parental investment, while women are expected to choose mates with high status and greater access to resources. [The New York Times has reported](#) that Epstein was interested in maximizing his reproductive success by impregnating many women — preferably, brilliant scientists — at his ranch in New Mexico. [According to Roger Schank](#), a psychologist and computer scientist who has held posts at Yale and Stanford, Epstein once asked him whether these children would turn out like him if he provided only sperm and cash; Schank replied that Epstein should prevent the women whom he impregnated from forming relationships with other men in order to safeguard his genetic investment.

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Trivers has had a colorful career, hopping from academic post to academic post. While at UC-Santa Cruz, Trivers earned a reputation as a radical and the umbrage of university administrators by co-authoring work on self-deception with revolutionary activist Huey P. Newton and briefly joining the Black Panther Party. Trivers's apparent commitment to Black liberation may have had its origins in his self-described attraction to Black women: of his choice to specialize in Jamaican lizards, for instance, Trivers has said "I took one look at the women [in Jamaica] and

thought, if I have to study lizards to pay for frequent trips to this island, I'll do it."

After leaving UC-Santa Cruz for Rutgers University, Trivers swapped humans for lizards as study subjects. Trivers investigated the hypothesis that female mate choice is linked to physical appearance by testing whether children with a higher degree of body symmetry were considered better dancers by their peers. In order to do this work, Trivers and his coauthors paid families in rural Jamaica to film their children dancing and measure those children from head to toe. Trivers and his coauthors chose Jamaica as a study site because of the relative ease of obtaining permission to study young children compared to the United States, which has strict Institutional Review Board approval processes for any research involving human subjects.

[In an interview with Aeon magazine](#) in 2015, Trivers elaborated on the advantages of a Jamaican field site: "One reason we chose rural Jamaica is that it is economically disadvantaged, and since we paid all families we recruited for the study, we got an extraordinarily high participation rate." It was for this work on the bodies of poor Jamaican children that Epstein gave Trivers \$40,000, which Trivers acknowledged in a [follow-up paper](#) from 2014 investigating whether knee symmetry made Jamaican sprinters better athletes. When asked in 2015 whether Epstein's abuse of children had complicated Trivers' decision to take the billionaire's money, Trivers responded [by describing Epstein as a person of integrity](#) and claiming that girls these days mature so quickly that "by the time they're 14 or 15, they're like grown women were 60 years ago, so I don't see these acts as so heinous."

Martin Nowak, an evolutionary biologist who specializes in mathematical modeling, is a far more conventional academic than Robert Trivers, but the financial largesse he received from Epstein dwarfs any contributions Trivers received. Nowak received at least \$500,000 in funding from Epstein personally during the 1990s and early 2000s [after the two struck up a friendship](#) that involved weekly meetings and intimate tete-a-tetes

over dinner, per *New York Magazine*. Nowak has been effusive in his praise of Epstein, stating "Jeffrey has the mind of a physicist. It's like talking to a colleague in your own field... because of his support, I feel I can do anything I want." In 2003, the year after he offered these complements to Epstein, Nowak was appointed to a professorship at Harvard. Epstein extended a further \$6.5 million to Nowak to establish the Program for Evolutionary Dynamics there, at which Nowak serves as director.

Nowak's work is wide-ranging, covering everything from game theory to the evolutionary dynamics of viral infections, but his work focuses on the evolution of cooperative behavior, drawing heavily on Trivers' academic publications as well as the work of sociobiology heavyweight EO Wilson. Nowak describes cooperative organisms — from bacterial biofilms to human societies — as vulnerable to invasion by cheats who exploit the altruism of their neighbors; Epstein, apparently, was interested in how the evolution of cooperation [could explain the origins of money](#) — and be used to predict market behavior. Harvard has defended its decision to accept and then keep Epstein's donations even after his pedophilia came to light on the grounds that the university accepted no Epstein funding after 2008; however, Nowak was facilitating meetings between Epstein and Harvard scientists [as late as 2014](#).

But far and away the most famous known associate of Epstein among the evolutionary psychology set is Harvard professor Steven Pinker, although he has been at some pains to distance himself from Epstein since the billionaire was rearrested in July of this year; he now claims that he always found Epstein ["tedious and distasteful."](#) But Pinker's distaste for Epstein was not enough to prevent him from [doing his friend and fellow Harvard professor Alan Dershowitz a favor](#) a decade ago, however, when Dershowitz was serving as Epstein's defense attorney. Pinker, a psychologist who has specialized in the evolution of language, submitted analysis of the wording of the "Internet Luring Statute," a federal law which criminalized using the internet to communicate with minors in order to entice them across state lines for the purposes of sexual

exploitation. Epstein was not convicted under this statute; he was instead allowed to plead to lesser charges of prostitution and to receive an extraordinarily favorable sentencing.

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Pinker is a talented popularizer of science and authored several books on language which were generally well received. He has attracted controversy, however, for engaging with popular debates on evolutionary psychology's more sweeping claims in the 1990s. His 2002 book *The Blank Slate* is a sustained attack on those academics, intellectuals, and feminists who weight nurture more heavily than nature in the development of human behavior. While defending the book *A Natural History of Rape*, whose authors Craig Palmer and Randy Thornhill (a Trivers coauthor on the Jamaican symmetry work) helpfully advise women to wear modest clothing to prevent assaults, Pinker describes typical rapists as "losers and nobodies," "outcasts," or perhaps "ethnic rioters." The billionaire science enthusiast is not included in Pinker's rapist typology.

While Pinker has been at some pains to minimize the extent of his relationship with Epstein, he was thoroughly networked with recipients of Epstein largesse. Pinker has described Trivers as "one of the great thinkers in the history of Western thought" who has "provided a scientific explanation for the human condition." Pinker's graduate advisor, Stephen Kosslyn, received money from Epstein for work on evolutionary psychology and [described him as an "amazing" pollinator of ideas between scientists](#). Former Harvard President Larry Summers, who flew on Epstein's plane and facilitated Epstein's donations to Martin Nowak's Evolutionary Dynamics lab, attracted the ire of feminists in 2005 for comments ascribing female scientists' relative lack of achievement to

biological differences in IQ between men and women; [Pinker leapt to Summers's defense](#) in the pages of *The New Republic*.

The world of elite science is so insular and so shaped by personalities at a handful of institutions that evolutionary psychology's chief critics have been professors of biology at Harvard as well. For 30 years, the geneticist Richard Lewontin and the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould sparred with Pinker, Trivers, and *Sociobiology* author EO Wilson in academic journals like *Proceedings of the Royal Society of London* and publications like *The New York Review of Books*. In particular, Gould and Lewontin attacked the sociobiologists for their overreliance on adaptationist just-so stories, which considered natural selection as a driver in evolution to the exclusion of random processes like genetic drift or the evolution of traits as a byproduct of genuinely adaptive features, and for hypothesizing without presenting direct genetic evidence that natural selection had actually shaped particular human behaviors. The exchanges could be scathing: Trivers has called Gould a charlatan, and Pinker refers Gould and Lewontin frequently as "radical scientists" in *The Blank Slate*.

Gould, who died in 2002, was a Marxist, and Lewontin, at 90, presumably still is one. This has made it easy for their critics to describe them as blinded to the truths of evolutionary psychology by their outré politics. That the evolutionary psychologists might themselves be influenced by political values, like patriarchy or neoliberalism, is never considered. Of the relationship between politics and science, [Gould wrote](#), "all science is embedded in cultural contexts, and the lower the ratio of data to social importance, the more science reflects the context." Gould himself has been named as an Epstein associate (his literary agent, John Brockman, brought together many of the scientists in Epstein's circle), but died of cancer in 2002, before Epstein's crimes were known.

That we know as much as we do about Epstein's social milieu is in large part due to one of his victims' battle for justice in the courts. Virginia Roberts Giuffre, who was employed and abused by Epstein as a teenager,

has filed multiple lawsuits against Epstein associates. A memoir Giuffre authored is included among documents released as part of her suit against accused Epstein madame Ghislaine Maxwell. In this memoir, Giuffre describes a conversation she had with Epstein on the subject of biology while she was giving him a massage. According to Giuffre, when she complained of a boyfriend's infidelity, Epstein responded, "I'm going to save you a lot of grief with this one tip. Never expect a man to be faithful and you'll never be let down. It's just the way us men are genetically imprinted."

It can be easy, while detailing the intellectual squabbles of Epstein's scientific coterie and the losses to power and prestige for some Epstein-associated scientists after this summer's revelations, to lose sight of who Epstein's real victims were. Whatever the fallout to academics and trainees at MIT's Media Lab or Harvard's Program for Evolutionary Dynamics, it does not compare to the suffering caused to the poor and disadvantaged women and girls whom Epstein preyed on at an industrial scale.

Epstein is dead, and now beyond the reaches of human justice, but it is still possible to hold his enablers and scientific sycophants to account. It is necessary, but not enough, to demand that individuals like Trivers and Nowak and institutions like Harvard and MIT return the millions they received from Epstein. The ideas produced by these scientists also matter. Evolutionary psychologists have naturalized, and even at times excused, male sexual violence, but evolutionary biology is not the sole province of reactionary white men. Those of us working in this field must push back on both the corrupt funding system at elite institutions and flawed ideas these institutions have produced.

Alexandra Walling is a graduate student at the American Museum of Natural History.