



The Myth of Monogamy: Fidelity and Infidelity in Animals and People

By David P. Barash, Judith Eve Lipton

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Applying new research to sex in the animal world, esteemed scientists David P. Barash and Judith Eve Lipton dispel the notion that monogamy comes naturally. In fact, as *The Myth of Monogamy* reveals, biologists have discovered that for nearly every species, cheating is the rule -- for both sexes.

Reviewing findings from the same DNA fingerprinting science employed in the courtroom, Barash and Lipton take readers from chickadee nests to chimpanzee packs to explain why animals cheat. (Some prostitute themselves for food or protection, while others strive to couple with genetically superior or multiple mates.) *The Myth of Monogamy* then illuminates the implications of these dramatic new findings for humans, in our relationships, as parents, and more.

The Myth of Monogamy at last brings scientific insight into this emotionally charged aspect of the ultimate dating and marriage quandary.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Shattering deeply held beliefs about sexual relationships in humans and other animals, *The Myth of Monogamy* is a much needed treatment of a sensitive issue. Written by the husband and wife team of behavioral scientist David P. Barash and psychiatrist Judith Eve Lipton, it glows with wit and warmth even as it explores decades of research undermining traditional precepts of mating rituals. Evidence from genetic testing has been devastating to those seeking monogamy in the animal kingdom; even many birds, long prized as examples of fidelity, turn out to have a high incidence of extra-pair couplings. Furthermore, now that researchers have turned their attention to female sexual behavior, they are finding more and more examples of aggressive adultery-seeking in "the fairer sex." Writing about humans in the context of parental involvement, the authors find complexity and humor:

Baby people are more like baby birds than baby mammals. To be sure, newborn cats and dogs are helpless, but this helplessness doesn't last for long. By contrast, infant *Homo sapiens* remain helpless for months ... and then they become helpless toddlers! Who in turn graduate to being virtually helpless youngsters. (And then? Clueless adolescents.) So there may be some payoff to women in being mated to a monogamous man, after all.

Careful to separate scientific description from moral prescription, Barash and Lipton still poke a little fun at our conceptions of monogamy and other kinds of relationships as "natural" or "unnatural." Shoring themselves up against the inevitable charges that their reporting will weaken the institution of marriage, they make sure to note that monogamy works well for most of those who desire it and that one of our uniquely human traits is our ability to overcome biology in some instances. If, as some claim, monogamy has been a tool used by men to assert property rights over women, then perhaps one day *The Myth of Monogamy* will be seen as a milestone for women's liberation. --Rob Lightner

From Scientific American

Monogamists, this husband-wife team says, "are going against some of the deepest-seated evolutionary inclinations with which biology has endowed most creatures, *Homo sapiens* included." Barash, professor of psychology at the University of Washington, and Lipton, a psychiatrist, note how rare monogamy is in the animal kingdom. One could not have been so sure about humans until the advent of DNA fingerprinting, which makes it possible to "specify, with certainty, whether a particular individual is or is not the parent." And a "key point" is that women as well as men stray from monogamous relationships. The argument leads one inevitably to ask why monogamy exists at all and why human societies show such concern about it. Barash and Lipton suggest that it may occur as a means for males to minimize the risk "that someone else's sperm will fertilize the eggs of a given female" and that society's many strictures against adultery arise because monogamy is not automatic "but needs to be enforced and reinforced."

Editors of Scientific American

From [Booklist](#)

In biological terms, *monogamy* has two definitions: a social system in which one male and one female pair and raise offspring, and a reproductive system in which one male and one female are the parents of the offspring they raise. This subtle difference is all-important, as zoologist Barash points out in his review of a

mating system that most readers feel is "natural" and right. Social monogamy exists where the efforts of both parents are necessary for the survival of offspring--but these "parents" may not be the biological parents of every infant they rear. Focusing on birds and invertebrates, because most mammal mothers rear their young with no aid from males, the author shows how DNA fingerprinting has proven that cheating in supposedly monogamous relationships goes on in both sexes. The biological reasons for this faithless behavior make for fascinating reading. Many females seek copulation with males of superior genetic fitness but must return to their mates to raise the young. Males cheat to produce as many offspring as possible. Overall, the species benefits because young of superior genetic quality are reared with the necessary care of two "parents." Scores of examples, and the scientific explanations for each case, are presented to bolster the author's contention that genetic monogamy is not "natural." The implications for our own species, where the moral teachings of culture and religion clash with our biological imperatives, fill perhaps the most interesting chapter. Copious endnotes provide the bibliography for this highly recommended work. *Nancy Bent*
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Users Review

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