

## Correcting Some Misrepresentations About Gender and Sexual Economics Theory: Comment on Rudman and Fetterolf (2014)

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We were disappointed to read Rudman and Fetterolf's (2014) misrepresentation of sexual economics theory (SET). We were also puzzled: Their empirical findings seem to support the theory, contrary to their claims to have refuted it.

Rudman and Fetterolf relied on quasiparaphrase to attribute tenets to our theory. We encourage readers to read our own presentation of our theory (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004) and then read Rudman and Fetterolf's interpretation to see for themselves. Rudman and Fetterolf's investigation was based on a fundamental mistake: "SET's central tenet is that women are more invested in sexual exchange than men are" (p. 1438). This interpretation is wrong: Whether men or women have a greater desire to make the exchange can be predicted by the principle of least interest. As the basis for SET, this principle holds that whoever wants the outcome more will be correspondingly more willing to sacrifice in the hopes of getting the exchange to take place (Waller & Hill, 1938/1951). Moreover, crucially, a basic lesson of economics is that exchanges take place mainly when both parties benefit (Smith, 1776/1937). According to our theory and much evidence, men want sex and women want men's resources, and that creates the basis for a mutually beneficial exchange.

Rudman and Fetterolf wrote that "SET is a dark view of gender relations that portrays women as low-status commodity holders (sex is a female resource) and men as high-status commodity seekers" (p. 1439). This, too, is wrong: The very notion of exchange entails that both sides have commodities, which they trade. If our theory was described as "dark" because we suggested that men typically hold higher social status than women, we are not alone in that perspective: The World Economic Forum (2013) noted that women have lower status than men in all nations.

Indeed, we ourselves have used SET to point out how men benefit from greater gender equality (Baumeister & Mendoza, 2011). We do not think of SET as a political statement, though, and object to Rudman and Fetterolf's attempts to politicize it. As is the case with most economic

theorizing, SET is a descriptive theory, not a prescriptive one. Rudman and Fetterolf seem to have conflated the two notions.

On the data side, most of what Rudman and Fetterolf reported are null findings, which might reflect their choice of methods (as well as predictions). For instance, they tested SET, which is a theory fundamentally about sex, with stimuli that were chosen for their lack of sexual imagery. Why? In order to "avoid priming men with sex" (p. 1440), a choice that seems odd. And why were they concerned only about men, given their claims that women like sex just as much as (if not more than) men (p. 1442)?

Rudman and Fetterolf's failure to find a gender difference in Implicit Association Test (IAT) responses to sexual stimuli does not surprise us, nor does it indicate anything about gender differences in the desire for sex. The IAT assesses cognitive associations. SET is fully compatible with Rudman and Fetterolf's straightforward finding that both women and men associate sex with pleasure more than pain. Cognitive associations are theoretically distinct from urges, desires, and behavior. Bolstering that point are the results of a meta-analysis showing that the cognitive associations measured by the IAT do not predict meaningful outcomes, including behavior, preferences, and interpersonal patterns (Oswald, Blanton, Mitchell, Jaccard, & Tetlock, 2013). In contrast, hundreds of investigations and numerous meta-analyses studying urges, motivations, and behaviors have led to the conclusion that men want sex more than do women (Baumeister, Catanese, & Vohs, 2001).

Rudman and Fetterolf's few findings that were statistically significant either were misinterpreted or supported SET (or both). They used the words *mediate* and *mediation* (in the abstract and throughout the article) when in

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fact the effects they reported were instances of moderation. They reported that men associate sex with money more than do women. That association is clearly in line with SET, because it may well reflect men's belief that possessing money will help them attract women. (To be sure, women seek to exchange sex for resources other than money, such as to gain affection, attention, time, commitment, and children.)

We close by raising two broader issues. The first concerns sexuality theory. The power of two broad, competing grand perspectives—the evolutionary-essentialist and the feminist-constructionist—has created pressures for young researchers to join one camp (and thereby incur the other's hostility) or to be content with publishing atheoretical data reports (see Weis, 1998). Because of these dynamics, there has been a lack of theory development in this field (see Weis, 1998). SET was, in part, a response to this gap. It is a theory that builds on evolutionary principles by couching them in the context of the marketplace, which by definition is culturally constructed. For instance, evolutionary researchers have for decades articulated the idea that men want sex more than do women (e.g., Buss, 1998; Buss & Schmitt, 1993), whereas a mainstay of feminist theory is sexual oppression of women by men (e.g., Brownmiller, 1975). SET explains men's attempts to dominate women as being the result of men's relatively stronger desire for sex coupled with a motivation to give up as little as possible in the process of getting it. More broadly, SET is a novel framework that is compatible with either grand theory but requires neither—which is just what the field of sexuality has been said to need (Weis, 1998).

This leads to the second issue, concerning how scientists treat contrary views. Much of Rudman and Fetterolf's article is devoted to framing SET as an attempt to justify the oppression of women. Their abstract is peppered with phrases that associate SET with such noxious ideas as "patriarchy," "double standard," and "hostile sexism" (p. 1438). This approach continues throughout, with Rudman and Fetterolf claiming that "theories like SET and evolutionary psychology emphasize that women are valued mainly for sex" (p. 1446), a statement that is patently untrue and conflates SET with a whole other framework. Theoretical debates between multiple perspectives, backed with pertinent data, often are the best way to advance science. In contrast, caricaturing an opposing view as politically incorrect and oppressive strikes us as an attempt to silence perspectives that one finds disagreeable. That is more akin to a bullying tactic than a scientific one.

Perhaps the best way to summarize Rudman and Fetterolf's findings is to say that they indicate women do not like to acknowledge the exchange of sex for other resources, whereas men seem to more openly recognize

this process. This is consistent with much other evidence for SET and in fact is a point we made in our original article (Baumeister & Vohs, 2004). SET proposes that women may be motivated to conceal or deny the exchange of sexuality for men's resources because doing so can allow women to take resources without acknowledging obligation. This is the counterpart to men's quest to dominate women so as to be able to get more sex for fewer resources.

We understand why people do not want to see that economic principles can predict sexual behavior: SET is decidedly unromantic. Its main appeal is that science backs it up.

### Author Contributions

K. D. Vohs and R. F. Baumeister wrote the manuscript together.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared that they had no conflicts of interest with respect to their authorship or the publication of this article.

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