

'Tis the season for spending and giving, but what really motivates some of us to flash our cash? Evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller explains

Ulterior altruists

PEOPLE have radically diverse responses to the very idea of conspicuous consumption. Some folks consider it blindingly obvious that most economic behaviour is driven by status seeking, social signalling and sexual solicitation. These include most Marxists, marketers, working-class fundamentalists and divorced women. Other folks consider this an outrageously cynical view, and argue that most consumption is for individual pleasure ("utility") and family prosperity ("security"). Those folks include most capitalists, economists, upper-class fundamentalists, and soon-to-be-divorced men.

Such differences of opinion can rarely be resolved by trading examples or anecdotes, or arguing from first principles. It more often helps to apply some psychology. With this in mind, some colleagues and I devised a series of experiments inspired by "costly signalling theory" – the idea that animals, including humans, use costly, intricate and hard-to-fake signals to flaunt their biological fitness to potential mates and social partners. Our goal was to see how thinking about mating influences people's decisions about spending and giving (*Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, vol 93, p 85).

In the first experiment the team, led by Vladas Griskevicius from Arizona State University in Tempe and Josh Tybur from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, invited college students to the lab in small

groups. Each was randomly assigned to one of two conditions: "mating" or "non-mating". The mating subjects looked at three photographs of people of the opposite-sex on a computer screen, picked which one they thought most desirable, and spent a few minutes writing about an ideal first date with that person. The non-mating subjects looked at a street scene photograph and spent the same amount of time writing about the ideal weather for walking around and looking at the buildings it featured.

Then, all subjects were asked to imagine that they had a modest windfall of money, such as a lottery win of a few thousand dollars, and must choose how much they wanted to spend on a variety of conspicuous luxuries – such as a new watch, European vacation or new car – and how much they would save in a bank account. They were then asked to imagine that they had some extra time available per week, and were asked to choose how many hours they would spend volunteering – such as working at a homeless shelter or helping at a children's hospital.

The results were dramatic: men in the mating condition said they would spend much more money than men in the non-mating condition – for example, they might take the European vacation rather than saving that money – but there was no mating effect on women's consumption decisions. On the other hand, women in the mating condition said they would spend much more time



GEORGE EASTMAN-HOUSE/HULTON/GETTY



It's not what you give,
it's what your gift says
about you that counts

volunteering than women in the non-mating condition. There was no mating effect on men's volunteering. This study confirmed that conspicuous consumption (for men) and conspicuous charity (for women) can be increased by thinking about mating opportunities, and so can function strategically as a form of mating display.

Because costly signalling theory suggests that signals must be conspicuous and publicly observable in order to attract friends or mates, we wanted to see whether this mating effect applied especially to conspicuous rather than inconspicuous consumption and volunteering. So in a second experiment, another set of college students were randomly assigned to similar mating or non-mating conditions. Then, subjects indicated how much money they would want to spend on the same conspicuous consumption luxuries from study 1, or on some new "inconspicuous" necessities such as basic toiletries and household cleaning products. Finally, subjects indicated how much time they would want to spend on the same conspicuous volunteering from study 1, or on some inconspicuous but socially helpful activities such as picking up trash alone in a park or taking shorter showers to conserve water.

The results here were equally clear: men in the mating condition, compared with the non-mating condition, said they would spend more money on the conspicuous luxuries, and that they would actually spend less on the inconspicuous necessities; there was no effect on female consumption decisions. In contrast,

"Our goal was to see how thinking about mating affects people's decisions about spending and giving"

women in the mating condition, compared with those in the non-mating condition, said they would spend more time on conspicuous pro-social volunteering, but no more time on the inconspicuous pro-social activities. Again, there was no effect on male volunteering. So, thinking about mating does not simply increase overall consumer spending or pro-social volunteering; it only increases conspicuous consumption or conspicuous charity – the behaviours that work best as public, costly displays.

It was a bit surprising that in both studies, the mating-primed men did not act more conspicuously benevolent, and the mating- ➤

The intelligent philanthropist

Magnanimity is like a peacock's tail - a showy display driven by the adaptive, if unconscious, pursuit of sexual benefits and social status. This is the central message of the new evolutionary psychology of charity (see main story). As usual, modern consumerist capitalism is way ahead of the science. It has already perfected ways of exploiting our showy magnanimity instincts - and none is more horrifying than the gala charity fund-raiser.

At these barely sublimated mating rituals, charities take a few hundred pudgy, well-dressed millionaires, loosen their tongues and wallets with booze, bonhomie and good catering, and sweep them up into orgies of altruism-mania, moralistic self-righteousness, mock-heroic self-sacrifice and tipsy flirtatiousness. The biggest donors - usually rich, male and loosely married - are in the spotlight. The charity's beneficiaries are typically kept out of sight.

ADVERTISING OPPORTUNITY

Such events undoubtedly harness human instincts for giving, but are charities missing a trick? If conspicuous giving is mostly an evolved, unconscious strategy for donors to advertise their personal traits, then surely charities could improve their effectiveness by broadening the range of traits they enable donors to advertise. At the moment, conventional charitable behaviour shows agreeableness - kindness, empathy and generosity - but not much else. One organisation is trying to add intelligence, conscientiousness and more to the mix. To achieve this, the charities themselves have come under greater scrutiny.

GiveWell was founded in 2006 by former hedge-fund workers Holden Karnofsky and Elie Hassenfeld. Frustrated by the absence of evidence provided by charities that they are delivering the goods in terms of their charitable ends,

the pair decided to use their data-analysis skills to evaluate charities' effectiveness. They were appalled at what they found. Evidence-based charity lags far behind evidence-based medicine: virtually no charities do randomised, controlled trials regarding which interventions work. In fact, almost no charities collect any systematic data on whether or not their well-intentioned activities are actually doing any good.

GiveWell looks at the evidence in four areas: whether charity programmes have their intended effect, whether they are cost-effective, whether they are scalable - can use additional donations effectively - and whether they are transparent - accountable, self-critical and post online monitoring and evaluation reports. Out of 397 charities evaluated in depth so far, it recommends only nine, and gives its top 3-star rating to just four charities: international aid groups VillageReach and the Stop TB Partnership, US poverty charity Nurse-Family Partnership and KIPP, which supports education programmes in the US. Most of the big-name charities, such as UNICEF, Oxfam, Red Cross, Planned Parenthood, and Christian Children's Fund, get no stars. Most programmes for education, childcare, job training and drug abuse prevention get no stars.

Donors who favour charities recommended by GiveWell display agreeableness, but also intelligence, conscientiousness and openness to evidence. These traits are not only desirable in a mate, friend or colleague, they are especially attractive in the context of warm-hearted but hard-headed giving. What's more, if charities respond to GiveWell's challenge by providing evidence that they are effective, we will have more options to use our instincts for magnanimity to benefit others as well as furthering our own selfish interests.

CHARLES PLATIAU/REUTERS



primed women did not spend more on conspicuous consumption. Maybe mating-primed men only favour conspicuously heroic forms of benevolence, such as saving strangers from drowning, and mating-primed women only favour conspicuously generous forms of spending, such as bidding high at charity auctions. So, in study 3, another set of students followed the same routine as in study 2, except that they could choose to spend money on the original forms of conspicuous consumption or on more generous forms such as donating to natural disaster victims at an on-campus booth and bidding high at a public auction to raise money for sick children. Also, they could choose to spend time and energy on the original forms of conspicuous charity or on more heroic activities, such as saving someone from a burning building or distracting a grizzly bear from attacking a stranger.

He's my hero

As predicted, mating-primed women compared with control-condition women said they would spend more on generosity-signalling conspicuous spending; mating-primed men did the same. Also, mating-primed men compared with control-condition men said they would do more heroic helping, but not more non-heroic helping. There was no effect of mating condition on female heroic helping. Moreover, men who were most interested in promiscuous, short-term sexual



Public displays of generosity make us appear more attractive

did not make the man more attractive as a possible marriage partner. Men rating women were uninfluenced by the type of car she drove. This last study is especially intriguing since it suggests that women are attracted to conspicuously consuming men for their good genes (which can be obtained from a single copulation) rather than their good resources.

A study by the evolutionary psychologists Martin Daly and the late Margo Wilson from McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada, confirmed that mating priming influences economic behaviour more strongly among males than females. They were interested in people's "discount rates", which determine how patient people are when given a choice between a certain number of dollars tomorrow, or a larger number of dollars a larger number of days into the future. First they measured the discount rate for about 200 subjects. Then they asked people to look at photographs of potential mates or cars that were previously rated as highly attractive or unattractive. Finally, they remeasured each person's discount rate to see if it had changed after looking at the photographs.

They found that men who looked at the photographs of highly attractive women (from Hotornot.com) switched to a much higher discount rate – they became much less patient about money. Looking at cars had no effect on men's discount rates, and looking at men had no effect on women's discount rates. (However, women looking at highly attractive cars actually developed a lower discount rate – a more economically rational attitude better suited to saving up the money for buying a car.) In short, men who saw attractive women became much more motivated to get whatever money they could in the short term, presumably so they could spend it on conspicuous consumption to attract mates.

These nine studies nicely support the idea that much of human economic behaviour is engendered by motives of costly signalling to display our personal qualities to potential mates and other social partners. These motives are finely tuned and very specific. They show systematic sex differences, and are influenced by apparent mating opportunities. They reveal a human display psychology with intricate design features shaped over millennia of evolution, to attract mates and friends through certain kinds of costly, risky behaviours that reliably signal certain desirable traits. ■

Extracted from *Spent: Sex, evolution and the secrets of consumerism* by Geoffrey Miller (William Heinemann, £20), Copyright © Geoffrey Miller 2009

liaisons showed the largest increase after the mating priming in both generosity-signalling conspicuous spending and in heroic benevolence. This is strong evidence that men use these behaviours as costly mating signals.

If thinking about mating can increase men's heroic benevolence, perhaps other kinds of male benevolence might be boosted by mating motives – not just heroic acts, but charitable activities that also allow men to display their dominance or leadership.

In study 4, a final set of students indicated how willing they would be to do helpful things that were either low-status (the original activities from study 1), or socially prestigious (volunteering with Hollywood celebrities in the Make a Wish Foundation for terminally ill children, or coordinating meetings between charities and White House officials), or socially dominant (giving a speech for a good cause to a hostile crowd, or leading a risky public protest). Both sexes showed a marginally higher interest in socially prestigious pro-social behaviours when they were mating-primed. However, only the mating-primed men showed a higher interest in the socially dominant pro-social

behaviours, and this effect was carried mostly by highly promiscuous men.

Inspired by this last finding, Jill Sundie from the University of Houston, Texas, Griskevicius and their colleagues conducted four further studies. They measured interest in short-term mating using a scale called the "sociosexuality inventory" (*New Scientist*, 29 November 2008, p 32). Study 1 showed that high-promiscuity men were more willing to borrow fashionable clothes from a friend to impress a potential mate rather than a new boss, whereas low-promiscuity men would rather impress the boss. Women showed no difference.

Showy lotharios

Study 2 showed that high-promiscuity men who looked at photos of eight attractive women, compared with those who looked at photos of eight attractive buildings, said they would spend more money on items such as designer sunglasses or an elaborate car stereo rather than inconspicuous products such as low-cost jeans or a toaster. Study 3 showed this is only the case when the potential mating situation is a short-term hook-up rather than a long-term relationship. There was no shift for mating-primed low-promiscuity men or for women in either study.

Study 4 showed that women rated a man driving a Porsche Boxster as more attractive for a short-term sexual relationship than a man driving a Honda Civic. But the Porsche

"Women rated a man driving a Porsche Boxster as more attractive for a short-term sexual relationship"