

## Honest Signaling

A Review of Tucker Max & Geoffrey Miller, *Mate*. Hachette Book Group: New York, 2015, 374 pp., US\$18.17, ISBN # 978-0-316-37536-8

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When I started reading this book, I was ashamed to carry it in public. At first glance, its cover signals one's affiliation with the pickup artist (PUA) community, a subset of individuals who are famed to excel at human mating via unethical (i.e., exploitative; zero sum) means. The cover boasts "Become the Man Women Want" and encourages readers to paste a picture of their face onto Tucker Max, whose personal exploits and stories have made him a figurehead of the PUA community (e.g., Holiday 2012). If you browse the chapters, you will get the same impression, with titles like "Get Your Head Straight" and "Build Self-Confidence." For those who are apprehensive about the PUA community's more infamous literature, this style of writing may attract incredulous looks from friends and colleagues. However, browse the complete set of references, and your inner scientist will feel a twinge of curiosity. I was drawn to this book by the massive reference list posted on the book's website. An extensive reference list is encouraging because it suggests that the ideas contained within a text may be grounded in quantitative (if not experimental) evidence, rather than select pseudoscientific claims. If you dig deeper into the book, you will see terminology that should be familiar to any scholar who investigates or studies the evolutionary psychology of human mating, such as short- vs. long-term romantic relationships (Gangestad and Simpson 2000), tender defender (Archer 2009), mate value (Buss 2003; Sugiyama 2005), mate preferences (Conroy-Beam et al. 2015; Buss 1989), and mate

choice copying (Place et al. 2010; Waynforth 2007). Likewise, it references interdisciplinary theories and concepts such as signaling theory (Maynard Smith and Harper 2003), mating markets (Noë and Hammerstein 1994; Regnerus 2012), sociometer theory (Leary and Baumeister 2000), behavioral genetics (Plomin et al. 2013), personality (Eysenck 2013), and mental/physical cues of attractiveness (Lieberman 2013; Miller 2011), whose premises and predictions are rich with empirical support.

Upon finishing this book, my initial moral disgust toward it felt unjustified. Its authors make well-argued, scientifically substantiated, and sufficiently nuanced claims about human mating psychology. They describe key ideas from a variety of disciplinary perspectives and refine these ideas into instructional dating advice for men. In short, they explain how attraction and mating involves evaluation of potential romantic partners' traits by both men and women. These traits meaningfully cluster into various physical and mental attributes (chapters 5–9), which collectively signal an individual's attractiveness as a potential mate (chapters 10–14). The romantic value of these traits systematically varies between men and women (e.g., Buss and Schmitt 1993) and shifts depending on one's mating goals (e.g., a short- vs. long-term relationship; see Gangestad and Simpson 2000). Once introduced to these ideas, readers are encouraged to improve traits which signal qualities that are desirable within the type of relationship they seek (chapter 15–17) and practice interacting with women and signaling these attributes (chapters 18–21). This advice is illustrated for readers using experimental evidence and attention-catching examples, a structure which makes the book informative yet easily digested by the average reader.

Importantly, the authors consistently encourage readers to consider the advantages of empathy, fairness, and prudent moral reasoning in human mating. Throughout, readers are

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encouraged to consider women's perspectives and struggles (e.g., chapter 2+4), be open and honest about their mating goals (e.g., chapters 3, 15, + 21), and consider the interpersonal consequences of pursuing various mating strategies (e.g., chapter 3). For example, they outline the kinds of positive and negative experiences that people typically report having within short-term and long-term relationships and highlight that women also have these experiences and possess their own mating goals and preferences. The key to successful mating, they argue, is to understand what a potential partner wants, provide it, and thereby maximize mutual benefit within a romantic relationship. In this sense, the authors go beyond presenting cross-sex perspective-taking as an admirable display of empathic altruism and instead emphasize the practical benefits of fostering consensual, mutualistic exchanges between romantic partners (i.e., win-win relationships; see Connor 1995). In other words, the authors appeal to the reader's somewhat selfish motives by cleverly pointing out the rewards of being open, honest, and unselfish in the mating market. Unlike in previous work (e.g., Max 2011), readers are discouraged from deceiving their way into a romantic or sexual relationship, and instead are given clear, concise instructions on how to improve (chapters 4–8) and signal (chapters 10–14) facets of mate value that women typically find attractive in a potential romantic or sexual partner. As the authors note:

“You must make yourself more attractive to women, given the choice criteria they already have that are based on their evolutionary history, their cultural traditions, and their individual personalities and contexts. You can fantasize about their preferences being different... But in the real world, you can't argue women into changing their instinctive preferences. Your only practical and ethical point of leverage is to transform yourself into the kind of guy who completes their attraction circuits.” (p. 70)

The authors argue that developing these traits and abilities builds genuine self-confidence (chapter 1) which enables an individual to more effectively communicate (chapter 18), date (chapter 19), and mate (chapter 20–21) with women across a variety of romantic and non-romantic contexts (chapters 15–17). In this sense, *Mate* not only does an excellent job of dispensing information that may be helpful to men who experience difficulty interacting with the opposite-sex but it also outlines the long-term advantages of cooperative win-win mating strategies over deceptive zero-sum approaches to human mating.

*Mate* is not a comprehensive review of extant evolutionary psychological literature. One unfortunate weakness is that it does not provide in-text citations of referenced literature. This makes the text more readable for those who do not have experience navigating scientific writing, but can sometimes blur the line between empirically substantiated claims and flavorfully exaggerated or anecdotal examples (e.g., “In any

relationship with a woman... you'll probably be in tender mode 95 percent of the time and defender mode only 5 percent of the time”; p. 158). This can be an important distinction to make insofar as citations allow readers to more clearly follow the authors' scientific reasoning for the advice they give. For example, in talking about women's orgasms, the authors write:

“She knows she probably won't reach orgasm the first few times she sleeps with you. For men, sex is reliably pleasant. But for women with a new guy, she won't feel safe and relaxed enough, she won't be attracted enough to him yet, or he won't know her body well enough.” (p. 47).

Certainly, there are population-level sex differences in copulatory orgasm frequency (Laumann 1994), and women report more orgasms and greater sexual enjoyment within relationships characterized by commitment, attraction, and reciprocity (Armstrong et al. 2012). However, to someone who is not familiar with population statistics, advice like this sounds like “[all women] won't feel safe and relaxed enough...”, when the intended message is “[on average, you may reasonably assume] she won't feel safe and relaxed enough”. The authors should be commended for making complex material more accessible, but may consider emphasizing in future editions that their advice is extrapolated from studies of population averages (i.e., their advice is general enough to be applied across many situations but not specific enough to provide a full, nuanced understanding of mating psychology and individual differences). That said, referenced work presents a variety of both popular and empirical resources.

As the authors admit in their postscript, the book is a work in progress. Future editions should consider emphasizing the role of information asymmetry in signaling theory. The book clearly details how men can be oblivious to certain aspects of women's mating psychology, but it does not discuss aspects of men's mating psychology to which women can be oblivious (e.g., what cues of mate quality do men look for in women? How do men's preferences for certain attributes in women change depending on his mate goals and across various mating markets? How can women complete men's attraction circuits?). This kind of discussion could likely fill another book, but may be useful to elaborate insofar as cross-sex perspective-taking and sensitivity to opposite-sex mate preferences can be a helpful practice for both men and women who are woefully misinformed about human mating.

Future editions might also consider expanding on mutualistic perspective-taking during same-sex competition. Same-sex competition, like mate choice, also involves signaling (e.g., Jones et al. 2010; McAndrew 2009; Sell et al. 2009),

and can lead to interpersonal conflict and physical aggression (Archer 2009). Recognizing what these signals are and knowing how to more effectively, and perhaps respectfully (e.g., Romero et al. 2014), navigate them could also promote win-win exchanges within same-sex relationships, perhaps particularly within the realm of competition for mates. Moreover, this has the potential to further increase an individual's mate value (i.e., social proof; chapter 11) by virtue of closer, more expansive same-sex friendship networks.

I highly recommend *Mate*. Tucker Max and Geoffrey Miller have written a book which embodies the principles it explains. The book signals its value by concisely and confidently explaining important aspects of human mating psychology in a way that is instinctively appealing yet, for the most part, conscientiously evidence-driven. I encourage those who are put off by the book's association with Tucker Max to look past its cover and evaluate it for its scientific and ethical merits.

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