

Rationally Speaking #216: Diana Fleischman on “Being a transhumanist evolutionary psychologist”

Julia: Welcome to Rationally Speaking, the podcast where we explore the borderlands between reason and nonsense. I'm your host, Julia Galef and I'm here with today's guest, Professor Diana Fleischman.

Diana is an evolutionary psychologist at the University of Portsmouth where her research focuses on hormones, sexuality, and disgust. She's recently been working on a book about how we evolved to train each other with rewards and punishments, and how to make the best use of that. Diana, welcome to Rationally Speaking.

Diana: Thanks for having me on, Julia.

Julia: One thing that I find refreshingly unusual about you, in the field of Evolutionary Psychology is that you are what you call a “transhumanist evolutionary psychologist.” Can you explain what that means, why you use that label?

Diana: Sure. So when I was reading Nick Bostrom, he says something to the effect that, if somebody was going to do an experiment, where they were going to do the process of evolution, where those that didn't have the right adaptations were gonna die and those that did were going to survive, it would never pass any kind of ethical screening.

I think that we are machines. We are machines that are intended — our psychology and physiology have adaptations for us to survive and reproduce. And those functions of survival and reproduction are not always in the best interest of our happiness and the happiness of others.

So I don't really think that it makes sense for us to have this affection for our natural psychological and physiological adaptations just because they're the ladders that got us here. So I'm a transhumanist because I do think that rather than being machines that survive and reproduce, we could potentially change our native programming in order to make us better at being happy, and rational, and having the best interests of others at heart.

Julia: So the alternate attitude that you referred to, to this “affection for the ladders that brought us here,” for the evolutionarily-ingrained drives, or habits, et cetera... that is my model of the public's perception of evolutionary psychologists. That they think that when evolutionary psychologists talk about natural behaviors, or evolved drives, or something, they think that psychologists are saying, “Well since men evolved to have certain drives, then those drives are okay.” They think there's a normative component to talking about what behaviors or drives are natural.

That is not actually my model of what evolutionary psychologists tend to think. But it does seem to me that evolutionary psychologists... they tend to be kind of pessimistic about efforts to override, or work against, these drives. Just to pick a random example... cultural messaging that is supposed to radically change beauty standards, or something like that. An evolutionary psychologist might be like,

“Well we should be pessimistic about this, because it runs counter to these evolutionary drives.”

Diana: Yeah.

Julia: So in my view, you do diverge, not just from what people think evolutionary psychologists believe, but what they in fact actually believe. Why do you think you're more optimistic about the potential to work against our programming?

Diana: Well, I'm not that optimistic, actually, about the potential to work against our programming. I just think that we should really pursue technology that enables that. So if you were to talk to different evolutionary psychologists about what they think about the human condition, how to improve it — it also, I think, maps onto my view of the Paleo movement.

So I knew some people in the Paleo movement, there are some people who are involved in Paleo and Evolutionary Psychology. Paleo is this movement that says we should try to approximate some of the important characteristics of our evolutionary history, because those are the kinds of environments in which our bodies and our minds adapted to thrive.

So they say things like, “The reason that we experience depression is because we're not surrounded by people that we can be social with. Our families are very far away. They're these itemized nuclear families, for example. That we don't get enough time outside. That we don't get real cues that other people are there for us. So we don't get these kind of cues from others that they would take care of us if we were injured or sick because the state and other kind of paid people take care of those things.”

So what some people would say is the best possible thing for us to do, in terms of the human condition, is for us to, instead of trying to radically alter our human psychology and physiology, is to make our environment more similar to the environment in which we adapted. Then, we would see greater happiness and greater flourishing for humans.

I depart pretty strongly from that. Because I think that there is a kind of better way. Rather than being a neo-primitivist, which is what some people call themselves in Paleo. They say we should really stay away from computers and screens as much as possible, that we should really try to approximate this ancestral condition as much as possible.

I'm kind of more of a ... there's this movement called “accelerationism,” which is essentially saying that we should get out, we should develop technology so far that these ideals that we have — like sharing wealth equally — are actually possible, because of technological progress. Whereas they're not possible now because we're still in a sort of primitive state, at this current day and age.

Julia: So to follow up on the example that I kind of pulled randomly out of the air, which was modifying sexual-

Diana: The beauty standards, yeah.

Julia: Yeah, beauty standards. I'm curious about your take on this, because on the one hand there's this sort of model from evolutionary psychology, which as I understand, has a fair amount of evidence behind it. That what people are attracted to is ... Women that men are attracted to, for example, are women that show signs of high fertility, certain hip to waist ratios, signs of youth, things like that. Signs of health. That these are relatively constant across cultures.

But then on the other hand, I do see a big difference in beauty standards between cultures and over time. I'm not talking just about like fashion trends, like what you see on the cover of fashion magazines, which — I think there's a good case that those are not intended to appeal to men's sexual desires.

But if you just look, for example, at PornHub searches. I was just looking at this data the other day. PornHub actually has great data. They publish these infographics every year about what people are searching for, in what countries, and what times of day. It's really cool.

Diana: They do grants for Sex Researchers, too, now.

Julia: Do they really?

Diana: Yeah.

Julia: That's so interesting. But anyway, so for example if I'm remembering correctly, in recent ... I don't know, the last decade or two, searches for large breasts have gone down. Searches for MILFs have gone up.

Diana: Yeah.

Julia: Which is M-I-L-F, mother I'd like to... fornicate with. So anyways, I see changes like that over the course of decades, which kind of suggests to me that sexual preferences might be more malleable than evolutionary psychology would predict.

Diana: Yeah, this is something that I've changed my mind about a bit, actually. So you tend to ... In our ancestral environment, you would have had a group of about 200 people. You would have looked at the bodies of those people and whoever was attractive and unattractive would have been relative to what you saw around you.

Julia: Yeah.

Diana: So one important thing that I hadn't really considered until recently, is this kind of contrast effect that happens with advertising. Where you see slim people or people who are airbrushed, such that they look like they have perfect skin, perfect white eye sclera, perfect hair, those kinds of things. And in comparison, we all look very imperfect.

So I do think that that is something that has an effect, because of our level of psychology. That similar to the way a man can get an erection looking at a two dimensional picture of a woman, we also ... we consciously understand that these people that we see in their presentations in video and on television, et cetera, are

not real people. But we still are inherently are comparing ourselves and the people that we know to them.

So I do think that the expansion of the beauty standards, and talking about having people who are less conventionally attractive, less perfect, less symmetrical in the media, is actually really good.

I remember when I moved to the UK and I was really surprised that the news presenters were not as conventionally beautiful as the news presenters here in the United States. I mean, in the UK, people don't get braces on their teeth. So there are people with crooked teeth on television. I thought that that was really great, because obviously that is something that's going to potentially reassure people.

However, I do think that there are some things that are constants. I think having healthy skin is a constant. I think having a certain waist to hip ratio, there's some evidence that shows that that's been constant in our prehistory. Even if you look at kind of prehistoric figurines. If you look at their super stimuli, for these kind of fertility cues.

So I do think that we find the opposite sex attractive based on these kind of fertility cues. I don't think that human nature is so malleable that we're going to be able to find 80 and 90 year old women as attractive as we find 20 year old women.

I think that it's unfortunate when this idea is pushed that if we just change the cultural messages, that we could find anybody attractive, and we could be as attracted to literally any physical representation as we are to people who are young and conventionally attractive.

So, why I do think that advertising and marketing do shape our perception somewhat? I think they mostly shape the comparison, they actually don't change the goal posts. They don't change what we absolutely find physically attractive. They just make those standards harder to potentially attain.

Julia: Yeah. So here's my theory, I'm curious what you'll think of it: I'm actually pretty in favor of changing cultural messaging about what's attractive, and increasing representation for currently under represented body types, or ethnicities, et cetera.

The reason I'm in favor of this is not so much because I think it will change people's sexual desires. But because I think there are these two separate things which often get conflated, which is: on the one hand, sexual preferences. Then on the other hand, preferences about who you would want to be seen dating or who you'd want to marry. And the latter seems much more culturally malleable, more socially prescribed than the former.

When I look at the diversity of what kind of porn people consume in the privacy of their own homes, when no one is watching them, and it's just about sexual attraction, that seems much more diverse than what we see on the covers of magazines, for example. So it seems to me that, currently, social messaging is constraining what people are attracted to. So the goal should be to un-constrain that — and then we're gonna end up with more diversity of attraction. Not



because we've made people more attractive, but because we've made it more acceptable to be publicly attracted to different things.

Diana: Yeah. So you're saying that somebody actually might be searching for BBW, like big beautiful women on PornHub-

Julia: Right.

Diana: ... and might be almost exclusively attracted to overweight women. But then they might not want to be seen dating one because it has some kind of status connotations?

Julia: Stigma, or status, or something, yeah.

Diana: Yeah. I like your idea kind of just from a purely utilitarian perspective, if we could change society in such a way that we could find more people beautiful. Since we are more compelled by beauty, and since attractiveness can be such a huge obstacle, in terms of how much people make, and other kinds of considerations. How much we find people's ideas compelling, for example. Then I do think that actually that could be really good.

I do think that you're gonna come up also against what advertisers and marketers want to do. So you see this already — they are on the one hand, trained to sell products. And people find advertising that features beautiful, conventionally attractive people more compelling. Yet, there's this larger social goal that we might all have to change our programming in this cultural way. Where we would like to find more people attractive. So I do think that those two things are kind of going up against each other.

I've had these kind of conversations with people where I've said — when we have embryo selection, for example... So as a transhumanist, I think it would be great if there was embryo selection.

Let's say parents had a choice of choosing to have a conventionally attractive child or a less conventionally attractive child. I've heard people say, "Well, that's wrong because if you choose to have a conventionally attractive child, that's gonna cause them to have really great benefits. But it's also going to promote this idea of being conventionally attractive. It's going to make everybody have this kind of cookie-cutter attractiveness look."

I actually don't see a problem with that. If you have two different worlds, one in which we do this kind of hard work of culturally trying to make everybody more attracted to, and more accepting of, people who look various different ways... Or another world, in which embryo selection or genetics makes everybody look conventionally attractive and symmetrical... Both of those worlds are going to have, I think, greater happiness — if we think being attracted to people, and being open to them because we find them pleasing to look at is good.

But I think one of them is less work than the other.

Julia: To what extent do you think increasing people's attractiveness — either physical attractiveness, or like... there are all these guides you can find online for men, to

help make them behave in ways and talk to women in ways that will increase their success in dating, et cetera... To what extent do you think those efforts are zero sum?

Like, you could imagine it being the case that everyone gets more attractive. But there's still the same competition for mates. So the people in the bottom half are still in the bottom half. The fact that everyone's moved up doesn't actually change the calculus.

Diana: Yeah, in that future, if everybody was conventionally attractive, having a pimple would be the equivalent of missing an eye.

Julia: Right, exactly, yeah.

Diana: I don't know how it works because I don't know that much about physical attractiveness and how sensitive we would be to it if the goal posts were moved...

Julia: Right.

Diana: So I do think that that's an interesting kind of question. But, I think that this kind of scrutinizing itself could be something that we could change and that could be improved. I don't know, through genetic engineering.

Julia: Okay. Actually... I was going to move on to a different topic that wasn't about attractiveness and sexual preferences, but I have one last question on this topic that has been on my mind. So, the popularity of MILF searches on Pornhub — how does that square with the evo psych theory that men would be attracted to women at their peak of fertility, in their young 20s, or something like that? Why would that be so popular?

Diana: There's a controversy about whether or not men prefer women who are nulliparous — so, “parous” is fancy science way of saying ... Nulliparous is never having children before, and parous is a woman who's had children. What you see in chimps is that chimp males prefer older females who have offspring because they have proven fertility.

Julia: Oh, interesting.

Diana: Geoffrey Miller talks about this in *The Mating Mind* as well. What kind of women do you prefer, woman who are parous or not? I think that the MILF searches — this is just purely off the cuff speculation —

Julia: Sure, yeah, yeah.

Diana: ... On the one hand, in Catherine Salmon's “*Evolutionary Psychology*” she talks about romantopia and pornotopia. Pornotopia is this utopia of porn where women are immediately sexually interested. They drop to their knees in elevators. They're excited to see men. They're just thrilled to see any penis at all.

Romantopia is women's romance novels, where men are very heavily-investing. They pursue women to the ends of the earth, and then they pledge their undying love to her, even if he's a rogue or not nice to other people.

So both of these are kinds of unnatural ideas, and I do think that in some sense, people like MILFs because women are more sexually active and more willing to have casual sex potentially who are older and who have more sexual experience. So it just might seem more likely, like it lends a more realistic tone to the thing.

Julia: Interesting.

Diana: They also show these signs of proven fertility. So a man might prefer a nulliparous woman, a woman who has peak what they call “residual fertility” — so, she's got the most fertile years ahead of her — if he's interested in marrying her, long term mating with her, and having multiple children with her.

In terms of casual sex, like having easy sex with somebody that could result in a pregnancy, that's like a ticket in a baby raffle — then you might prefer a MILF because she might be more interested in casual sex. You know that she's fertile right now. You're not looking at her fertility in the future.

So, there's a somewhat I think artificial dichotomy that people make between short term mating and long term mating. But I do think that's one area that MILFs satisfy, is they seem to be up for it, and you know they're fertile at this very moment.

Julia: Right. Okay. So, a different aspect of human nature that I want to get your take on how malleable it is, is sexual jealousy.

I've seen you give at least qualified praise to polyamory, on Twitter. Which, a lot of evolutionary psychology would say it goes against our instincts, especially for men, to want to guard our mates. Why are you not super pessimistic about the feasibility of polyamory?

Diana: I'm not a polyamory evangelist, so I really don't think polyamory is for everybody. I've seen somebody like Dan Savage, the sex columnist, say something to somebody like, "If you are just overwhelmed with jealousy at seeing your partner dance with somebody else, then polyamory might not be right for you."

For my personal experience, I know that my jealousy has decreased a huge amount.

I snooped on a previous boyfriend I had when I was 21, and I read some very lurid description he wrote about this woman he was seeing before me with... a very different body type from me. I'll just put it at that.

I obsessed about this woman for years. After we broke up, I obsessed about this woman. I was so jealous about this woman who he dated for maybe a couple of months and who he never talked to again. He wanted to marry me — like, I basically had him in the bag, but I was incredibly jealous that he had previously been attracted to someone else.

It's just ludicrous. It was ludicrous, and it took me a while — but now, I'm comfortable with having partners who have other partners. So, I know from personal experience that I've been able to overcome my jealousy.

But I don't think the answer is to rewrite the evolutionary story. What I think Christopher Ryan has done, which is, he says that jealousy is culturally programmed and it's not natural. And it's very easy if we just wash that off, for us to go to our natural innate state which is to not be sexually or emotionally jealous.

Julia: Did he write Sex at Dawn or am I confusing him —

Diana: Yeah. He wrote Sex at Dawn, and there's a book called Sex at Dusk that refutes a lot of this stuff..

Julia: I love book titles that are just responses to other book titles. Steven Pinker wrote How the Mind Works and someone else wrote a book titled, The Mind Doesn't Work that Way.

Diana: It's really good, yeah.

I think that it's pretty hard to get past sexual jealousy, but I think that there's different techniques for men and women, and I don't think it's a pretty thing — like, people really glorify meditation. Meditation is really unglamorous. Getting over your sexual and emotional jealousy is really unglamorous.

So, I am optimistic that some people can be polyamorous. I think emotional jealousy actually still has a place. We are afraid that our partners are going to leave us, but emotional jealousy evolved in a context in which your partner leaving you could be a life or death situation for you and your offspring.

Julia: Right.

Diana: Obviously, there are different people over the world. There are hunter-gatherers where women collect 80% of the calories and if a man leaves them, it actually doesn't matter very much, because they can collect all the calories they need by themselves and with their kids. Then there are cultures in which men bring in meat and without a man around you would literally die, and cultures in which children are very likely to be killed or abused if their fathers are not around.

So this emotional jealousy, this jealousy at any cues that your mate is engaging with another woman, or might be more interested, or leave you for another woman, are very strong because they evolved in these life or death situations. For men, sexual jealousy evolved obviously before birth control, before paternity testing, when seeing your partner interact with any other man could mean that you were investing heavily in kids that weren't yours, otherwise known as cuckoldry.

So, I think that it's a huge mismatch. Mismatch is this idea in evolutionary psychology that the current environment and the ancestral environment differ in important ways. It takes a lot of work to get over emotional sexual jealousy.

I'm poly in that I love other people. My partner loves other people. But I do think that the most, kind of, what I would call stable relationship architecture is more like “monogamish.” It's a word from Dan Savage, which is where you give

somebody some, what they call hall pass, or some leeway to have interests, or flirtation, or encounters with other people.

Because I think what happens in very strict monogamy is cognitive dissonance. So for example, if I have a partner and he knows that if he sleeps with somebody else, I will leave him forever, and all of the relationship that we built, everything is going to be burned down to the ground... Then, what might happen is he is going to be pretty reluctant to flirt with other people. But then ultimately he will flirt with other people. Then, he's going to round up his emotions to love — because he's thinking, "Well, I'm endangering my primary relationship so much by flirting with or having sex with this other woman. I must be madly in love with this other woman. That's the only explanation for how much I'm endangering my current relationship."

I think that happens all the time. Somebody leaves a partner for someone else. That other relationship lasts a few months — and then they think, "Wow, that's just what polyamorous people call NRE, new relationship energy," which is the obsession and passion that we have for a new person. Which is really not indicative of how compatible we are with that other person.

So, I think polyamory has done a great thing by expanding this vocabulary, of talking about words that describe how we can maintain ongoing relationships with new relationships. But I definitely wouldn't endorse polyamory for everybody, and I don't think that everybody can get over sexual or emotional jealousy.

Julia: Just to sum up — one way in which allowing some deviation from traditional monogamy can be more stable, you're saying, is that kind of crush, infatuation, new relationship energy, etc... In a traditional monogamous relationship, you need to choose between your current relationship or indulging in this new relationship energy.

But in a monogamish relationship, you can indulge in it, and then it dissipates over time and you still have your original relationship.

Diana: Yeah.

Julia: So, it's more stable in that sense.

Diana: It's just like when you earthquake-proof buildings in Tokyo, you make them flexible, right?

Julia: That's nice.

Diana: That I think is how you can make monogamy more stable, is by making it flexible... One other thing I'll just say quickly about polyamory is that I think it works better for people who have unusual things in common, who are weird in specific ways and who are not totally replaceable. I'm going to talk about it in a market analogy. If I have a trading partner and I only get one thing from that particular trading partner, then I'm unlikely to want to trade with somebody else exclusively or move over with somebody else.

Diana: So, if the only thing that you have in common with your partner is that they're nice to you and you find them attractive, then that is not something that's irreplaceable. What's irreplaceable is that the two of you are part of some kind of a huge little subculture, or you're thinking really similar ways, or you have a long history together, or children together. Those kinds of things are irreplaceable. But if two people get together, they just like each other and they're attracted to each other and they try polyamory, they're literally going to be able to be replaced by anybody who comes along.

Julia: So what about stability on a societal level instead of an individual couple level?

Jordan Peterson has notoriously argued that monogamy ... I think his phrase was "enforced monogamy" — which did not mean holding women up at gunpoint and forcing them to be in monogamous relationships, but instead, like, societal pressure to be monogamous. And discouragement of premarital sex, I guess. Or at least polyamory, for sure — his argument is that this results in more stable societies, and lower violence.

He posted a paper on his website trying to give evidence for this claim. So, he claimed that it showed that men in monogamous relationships were less violent. But I looked at the paper, and it wasn't actually about that. It was about number of sexual partners. And it showed that men being violent was more common as their number of sexual partners went up. Which to me is not about monogamy at all. It suggests more of —

Diana: Women attracted to violent men.

Julia: Sure, that, or some underlying cause like increased testosterone causes an increase in sexual partners and also increases violence, or something like that.

Anyway, he did not seem to provide evidence for his thesis. But I'm curious about to what extent you buy that monogamy is a force for stability in society?

Diana: I think monogamy is just another one of these ladders, which — it got us to a place of relative peace and stability, but that doesn't mean that we should have affection for monogamy itself. There's lots of other ways of getting to the end point of less violent men.

And that's what I wrote about in the sex robot piece, that if men have access to pornography, or if they have access in the future to sex robots, that's going to make them less violent.

So pairing off men and women one to one — yes, that is one way of making men less violent. Because if a man has a partner and a family, he's going to be less risk taking. If a man has got no way to get a mate and no woman who is interested in him, that's going to increase his risk taking, including violent risk taking. Because he's literally at floor when it comes to possible reproductive success. Anything he does could possibly improve that situation.

You could also consider a society in which polyamory was more common to do the same thing. So, if you think about men who don't have access to partners, and don't have access to any kind of sex, as being the men who are the most violent.

People are always talking about incels — incels are just one group of men who got together on the internet to talk about how they couldn't get sex. But men who can't get sex are a much larger group. They're not all on 4chan. And these are the men who are most likely to cause problems. They're the men most likely to do terrorism, most likely to engage in homicide. These are the men that are the most dangerous overall.

There's a lot of men who — I'll just speak personally, I wouldn't want as a primary partner. I would never have as a boyfriend. But I like their company for a few hours. And they would make a fine secondary partner, talking in terms of polyamory.

A lot of women think, "Well, you are okay but you're not exactly boyfriend material." If that guy had, whatever, three women who saw him casually, that would do the same thing in terms of reducing his violence, and reducing society's violence, as him having a wife.

It would just be more spread around, in terms of who was having sex with him. The responsibility ... That's the wrong word entirely. The cues that he was getting, that he was not a reproductive dead end, would be more diffused. They might be diffused across several women, or they might be diffused across having a date two times with one woman per month. But to say that polyamory is bad because it's going to lead to this violence, totally ignores the mechanism by which monogamy creates less violence.

Julia: Yeah. Interesting. So, it seems to me like there are these two different things that are often conflated when talking about mechanisms that produce violence, or alternately stability, in society.

One is just access to sex — so that on that theory, men who just can't get sex turn violent and if that model were true, then access to new and better sex robots, or access to sex workers, like legalizing prostitution, that kind of thing would reduce violence and instability.

Then, there's this other model that says, "No, it's really more about status and in getting signals that you're not a reproductive dead end. You're not the bottom of the societal barrel because not a lot of high status women want to have sex with you." I guess that would also be tied up with resources, like in other countries that are very violent and also have polygynous marriage. The men who can't get access to partners are the men who just can't get resources in society, and so on. So, those are kind of all bound up.

I've actually spent a while browsing incel subreddits and forums online, just out of curiosity. I know, as you say, they're not the entirety of men who are having trouble on the dating market, so they may not be representative in a bunch of ways.

But at least reading their comments, it doesn't seem like what they're upset about is lack of sex. They don't seem that interested in sex workers for example. It seems much more like they're upset about what they perceived to be their low status — that women are not interested in them and that is society telling them

that they are a reproductive dead end. That doesn't seem like the kind of thing that sex robots would help with.

You referred to your article, the title is Uncanny Vulvas, we'll link to it on the podcast website... So, I guess that was one objection that I had to your article. The suggestion of sex robots helping with, let's call it, the incel problem — it seems to be operating on this first model that it's really about the sex itself, and not about status and respect in society.

Diana: Okay. So, I think that with incels it's very, very difficult to disentangle of these two things because of hypergamy. So, women prefer men who have status, who have jobs, who have resources, and that's something what's called hypergamy. The tendency that women have to want to marry up, or get in relationships with people who are higher in status than those who are lower in status. I think that's a very consistent mate choice across society. So men are complaining about that they can't get status, I think because that is actually what's preventing them from getting women.

I don't know how representative incels are of men at large who can't get sex, but it seems like if men are forming this kind of community, then they're going to be obviously influenced by one another's ideas, but also they're looking for some kind of companionship. These are men who are potentially more concerned with not getting women's companionship than not getting sex itself.

We do know that pornography seems to reduce the rate of violence against women even though pornography has become somewhat more violent in the past, if you think about spitting, slapping, that kind of thing.

Julia: Yeah.

Diana: It still seems to have reduced the rate of sexual assault, and sexual assault is at a very low rate.

So, these men might be saying, "It's not sex that I'm concerned with, and I don't want to have sex with sex workers." But that's also because sex work is stigmatized, and because as far as what I know about the Incel community, they want to have access to some kind of "good" woman, right? They want a good girlfriend. They don't want to have ... This is I think why they're misogynistic, essentially. Because they hate women who have sex with lots of men, because it really exacerbates their perception that they're being left out. They really hate "sluts," right?

Julia: Yeah.

Diana: Because those are the women who are more willing to have sex with other people who seem to have low enough standards that they have sex with other people, but they're unwilling to have sex with these Incels.

Diana: In order to get whatever, a good girl, or what is the word? They have this whole complete vocabulary —

Julia: It's a whole language. Yeah.



Diana: It's amazing. I have been reading red pill stuff, but I cannot...

Julia: Is it a Stacy? No, Stacy's the slut. Never mind.

Diana: Stacy's the slut.

Julia: I can't remember what the word is.

Diana: Stacy's the slut, and that's not what they want. They want, I don't know, some girl who's got a different weird name. That seems to be their problem, but it's also influenced by this community.

I take your point, but I don't think it's really possible to disentangle these things, and I think that the best cue that somebody has high status is actually women being interested in them.

For example, there's these mate choice copying papers. If a man is surrounded by attractive women who look like they're interested in what he says, versus sitting alone, a woman in a study will say, "That man who's surrounded by attractive women is more attractive" than a man who's sitting alone, the same guy.

Julia: The hypergamy theory — that women are attracted to men with more power, more resources, more status... If the evolutionary reason for that was women wanting men who are going to be good providers for them and their offspring, then wouldn't we expect to see that go down, if as society evolves into ... as women have more economic and political power, and they are less reliant on men providing for them and their offspring? And do we in fact see that?

Diana: There's something called the structural powerlessness hypothesis, on which David Buss was a researcher. I studied with David Buss, he was my advisor. And there was all this stuff that's saying women prefer men who are higher in resources. They prefer older men, and they prefer men who are more ambitious and more intelligent, all other things equal.

Diana: This other group, they said, "What about the structural powerlessness hypothesis?" Which is the idea that it's because women are excluded from getting resources, that they're interested in men with resources. Basically, it's because women don't have resources. What they did is they did a study where they looked at women who have university degrees that will indicate that they're going to make a good living — like MBAs, for example. Or women who earn a lot of money.

Women who earn a lot of money actually prioritize resources even more in a partner than women who make very little money. And men who make very little money don't prioritize wealth in their female partners any more than men who make a lot of money.

That structural powerlessness hypothesis doesn't actually seem to hold water.

Women who have these very good degrees, they also prioritize other partners, male partners, who make more money. You might think, "Okay, well they might want somebody complementary to them." A woman who doesn't make much

money because she's excluded for whatever reasons — you might say, because of sexism — that might be why she wants a higher investing or higher earning male.

But women don't just want men who are higher in status because they can take care of them and their offspring. Women also just like to have sex with those men. And the reason is something called in evolutionary psychology, the “sexy sons” hypothesis, which is: if you are with a man who's high in status, your sons are going to inherit his good characteristics. The intelligence, the social aptitude, the attractiveness, the dominance characteristics that have made him successful in whatever society.

... So, if you had a woman who was only attracted to men who were really nice guys but very low in social status, versus women who were very attracted to men high in social status... you would expect one of those women to have, just perpetuate sons who are more attractive to the opposite sex. Thus having greater representation of their genes in the next generation.

Julia: Yeah, it's interesting. There's this adjacent community to the Incel community, which is the “black pill” subculture. There's this hierarchy of pills. There's the red pill subculture, which comes from The Matrix, like, “taking the red pill” means waking up and seeing what reality's really like, as opposed to taking the blue pill which means staying blissfully ignorant.

The red pillers are like, “Oh, wake up. Women actually have all of these preferences for status and power, et cetera, and you have to be competitive on the dating market and ignore the feminists who tell you that you should be nice and respectful, et cetera.”

Then, the black pill subculture's like, “No, you red pillers are all self-deceiving. You can't fake, or you can't modify yourself to be high status and make women want you. Because now that women have resources in society, they don't actually care about status, et cetera, anymore. Now they just care about physical attractiveness and height and broad shoulders, and things like that, which you can't really do anything about, so we're all screwed.”

Someone needs to go on there and tell them about the evidence that suggests it's not actually true.

Diana: Yeah, I don't think that that's true. And I do think that it's possible to fake confidence, and absolutely women do go by these different cues. [Though] I think that women are actually pretty good at sussing out fakers. I don't think that a lot of the, whatever, “pick up artist” stuff works. I know enough people who have told me about it, and I've actually had people try some of these things on me and I think it's hilarious, but —

Julia: Okay, trying it on an evolutionary psychologist is not the most representative test.

Diana: In all fairness, I don't think he knew. I was like, “This is literally exactly something from The Game. What are you doing?”

Julia: But I mean, you're going to be better at noticing when people are doing a thing, than the average woman would.

Diana: I went on a date with this guy, and I'm like, "Are you negging me right now? Do you think that's a good [idea]?" Anyway. The black pill guys who think that women have status and resources and don't need men, yeah, there are definitely women who are more independent, but this is another area I think it's pretty hard to get away from your programming.

In terms of a woman selecting a man who is going to be a provider and be around, that's just the idea that women are really going to be concerned with physical attractiveness is not at all borne out. I mean, men still account for like whatever, 90% of porn. You would just see a totally different thing. You'd see a lot of women, why aren't there magazines just filled with good looking, broad shouldered, tall men for women to ogle? It doesn't make any sense.

Julia: Diana, before I let you go, I wanted to ask you a question which — I sometimes worry that guests won't have a good answer for this, but of all people, I feel like you will have a good answer for this... A book or other resource, including a thinker, an author, who you have substantial disagreements with, but you still think is valuable to engage with? Like, they propose interesting hypotheses or they have really good methodology or something like that.

What would you recommend?

Diana: I really like Essays on Reducing Suffering. I like Brian Tomasik a lot.

I think Brian Tomasik errs on the side of giving too many creatures the benefit of the doubt in terms of how much they suffer. Brian Tomasik makes videos on YouTube as well of insects suffering out in fields. They're not actually very well viewed, as you might imagine, but his essays are really great.

I think that he's super open to criticism, he's incredibly constructive. He and I have had disagreements, because I am a vegan who eats oysters and clams and scallops and muscles, and I don't think that they suffer, because I don't think that they have the neural basis of suffering. He disagrees with me on that, and we've had a longstanding disagreement on that, but he's never —

Julia: Is it that he puts a higher probability on them being able to suffer than you do? Or that he thinks we should err on the side of caution even if the probability is low? Like, more risk averse than you.

Diana: Both. He's both more risk averse than me, and he puts a higher probability on their ability to suffer. Also, if you eat mussels, you're eating whatever, 50 in a sitting.

Julia: Right, so the stakes are high.

Diana: If they can suffer, then you multiply that probability over and over again.

Julia: Well, that's true.

Diana: I think he's amazing. I love his essays. And some of the conclusions that he's come to I disagree with, but I think that he's one of the best thinkers about things like wild animal suffering, and animal suffering, out there.

On a less serious note, I have been reading a book by a woman called Esther Vilar, called "The Manipulated Man." It's from 1971. It's a reaction to the feminist movement of the time, and she says rather than men being the oppressors of women, women are actually the oppressors of men, and women have done a great job of manipulating men to satisfy all their needs. Men have invented automatic dishwashers and laundry machines, and are taking care of all of women's needs, and inventing their makeup.

Some of it I think is really over the top, and she's just I think almost trying to be comically contrarian, but I have found it a very entertaining read. I just found out about her because I'm doing a book about how women train men, and somebody recommended her book, and I'm hopefully going to meet her in London. It's just a very, very entertaining book.

Julia: Oh, wow.

Diana: It's called "The Manipulated Man." It's very popular among red pillers.

Julia: Interesting. Has it changed your views at all or did you just find it an entertaining, bracingly different thing?

Diana: I think that anything where you are reading something and you're trying to figure out in your own, in a meditative Vipassana way — is this making my chest tighten up? Am I affected by this? ... it will teach you something about your own views.

It didn't really change my views that much. I think she's got quite a low view of women, which I entirely disagree with. But I do think that she's put some things in I think a very interesting way that I hadn't thought about before.

She wrote another book, but unfortunately it's not available that widely that English, which is called "A Man's Right To The Other Woman," which I think is an early endorsement of polygyny, so I definitely will want to check that one out, too.

Julia: So not polyamory? Polygyny specifically?

Diana: Polygyny specifically.

Julia: Wow.

Diana: I don't know much about it, so I will just say that I'm trying to find a translation in English, so yeah.

Julia: Okay, great. Well, we'll link to both Brian Tomasik's essays on animal suffering and also to "The Manipulated Man." I'll try to make it clear on the podcast website that you didn't nominate these as things that you fully agree with, but instead as things that are worth reading, as alternate perspectives.

... Which is a mistake that I made in an episode a couple years back. I asked the guest for a recommendation that he disagreed with, and he named, I think it was Ayn Rand. And then I just put it up there as his pick for the episode, and realized later that was really-

Diana: You monster.

Julia: ... uncool of me. I know.

Okay, well, Diana, thanks so much for joining us. This was interesting, entertaining, and enlightening all together. Yeah, we'll have to have you back to talk about disgust and people training each other.

Diana: Thank you so much, Julia.

Julia: This concludes another episode of Rationally Speaking. Join us next time for more explorations on the borderlands between reason and nonsense.