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Exceeding the Threshold

Why Women Prefer Bad Boys

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F POPULAR WISDOM CAN BE TRUSTED, “NICE GUYS FINISH LAST.” It is an aphorism especially apt in the realm of romance, dating, and sex, in which the perfect gentleman is often perceived as well-intentioned but ultimately unsuccessful and sometimes even pathetic. Perhaps this stereotype is perpetuated largely by the ostensible accuracy of its inverse: bad boys often seem to finish first. After all, James Bond, James Dean, and Jesse James all share a dangerous, roguish persona, and women in our popular perception seem to find them hard to resist. Indeed, existing scientific literature upholds the idea that bad boys are irresistible. These studies, of course, couch that irresistibility in the reproductive success of bad boys. In other words, studies examining dominance and hypermasculinity show that bad boys have more sexual partners and are perceived as more attractive than their more considerate counterparts (Sadalla et al. 1987; Bogaert and Fisher 1995). At the same time, however, studies by the likes of Urbaniak and Kilmann (2003) and Herold and Milhausen (1999) indicate that women adamantly claim to prefer nice guys. There is, then, an apparent discrepancy within current scientific literature on the subject of female attraction.

Such a discrepancy might lead us to argue that the studies are inconclusive. Worse, they might have us conclude that women don’t know what they want. But we can make two claims here that might make sense of this discrepancy. First, we can see that what women say they want may actually be at odds with what they truly desire. There might be a host of issues here like social expectations that can explain that the difference between their stated preferences and their actual choices are, in fact, genuine. The second claim we can make, and the focus of this paper, is that we can bridge the discrepancy by seeing the good guy and bad boy model as a gradient rather than a dichotomy. That is, we may be served by introducing a bad boy “threshold” that does not see the world of men in mutually exclusive terms. In other words, to make sense of the divergent literature on the subject we need to understand that women desire men who exceed a certain minimum of bad boy qualities. This would allow us to argue that bad boy qualities are a requirement that must be met, and that nice guy attributes are attractive only once an individual has proven himself sufficiently “bad.”

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t may be helpful first to better define our common understandings of bad boys and nice guys. Such definitions will clarify the different motivations for pursuing a mate with either bad boy or nice guy characteristics, and thus ultimately suggest the necessity of “exceeding the threshold.” One way to delineate each of these opposing terms is to extract common qualities from various studies that profess to examine bad boys and nice guys. This procedure yields the following characteristics: bad boys are dominant, suggesting the superior heredity and resources that women desire; nice guys, on the other hand, are agreeable, exhibiting the dependability and commitment that women appreciate. With such definitions, we can more readily see that what women say they want and what women actually desire are not at odds with one another when we propose a model that considers a minimum threshold.

In *The Evolution of Desire* (1994), renowned evolutionary psychologist D.M. Buss enumerates essential attributes that women seek in their partners that may help us parse the differences between bad boys and nice guys. In short, the evolutionary distinction between bad boys and nice guys can be explored by divvying up these attributes into those that match our definition of bad boy and those that match our definition of nice guy. Economic capacity, social status, ambition, size, strength, and good health all align with the superior genetics and resources of the bad boy. Of these, good health, size and strength – attractive because they offer females physical protection from other large, aggressive males – can most obviously be traced back to genetics. Ambition, economic capacity, and social status are indicative of a male’s access to resources, from which a woman can obtain food, shelter, protection, and the future transfer of status to her offspring (Buss 1994; Bogaert and Fisher 1995). On the other hand, dependability, stability, compatibility, and commitment – all qualities that signify a male’s exclusive dedication to and consideration for one individual female partner – define the attractive behavior characteristic of the nice guy. We can therefore define a “nice guy” as *a man exhibiting the mating behavioral tendencies desired by women* and a “bad boy” as *a man exhibiting the genetics and resources desired by women*. Such definitions will help us better understand the gradient threshold between them.

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o what might existing studies on the subject reveal about female attraction to these bad boys and nice guys? Scientific studies, including examinations of actual female behavior, suggest that women are attracted to these bad boys, even as they claim to seek out nice guys. Male dominance, the overarching quality encompassing the physical attractiveness and possession of resources (Bogaert and Fisher 1995) that defines a bad boy, has been linked to higher perceived attractiveness and to a higher number of sexual partners. Sadalla et al. (1987) conducted a study composed of four separate experiments, each of which directly juxtaposed a dominant and a non-dominant individual. In this study, Experiment 1 featured silent videotapes that displayed interactions between a high- and low-dominance male, and Experiments 2-4 presented textual descriptions that suggested either high or low levels of dominance for various individuals. In all four experiments, males exhibiting dominant characteristics were consistently rated as significantly more attractive than their more submissive counterparts, both in the context of dating desirability and in the context of sexual attractiveness. In a different study by Bogaert and Fisher (1995), participating university men were presented with a series of personality inventories, evaluated on a scale of physical attractiveness by several third parties, and tested for level of testosterone. Of these participants, the dominant, hyper-masculine, high-testosterone bad boys were shown to have significantly more lifetime sexual partners than did males scoring lower on these traits. The results of this Bogaert and Fisher study establish a critical aspect of the nature of female attraction to bad boys: ultimately, women choose bad boys more often than nice guys as sexual partners.

Still, females claim to want nice guys, as other scientific studies have demonstrated. In Urbaniak and Kilmann’s (2003) study of the nice guy and physical attractiveness, women were asked to select a date among three archetypal men for themselves and for another woman in a fictional dating game. These men – “Nice Todd,” a neutral second contestant, and “Jerk Todd” – were differentiated by their responses to the question, “What is your definition of a ‘Real Man?’ And are you one yourself?” “Nice Todd” provided a very sensitive, considerate response; the neutral contestant gave a middle-of-the-road reply; and “Jerk Todd” responded arrogantly and selfishly. In a second component of the study, these same male contestants were assigned photographs of varying levels of physical attractiveness. In this fictitious dating game, women consistently preferred the contestant “Nice Todd” over the neutral second contestant, and consistently preferred the neutral second contestant over “Jerk Todd,” even when “Jerk Todd” was rated as significantly more physically attractive than the neutral contestant. Similarly, in a study by Herold and Milhausen (1999), 54% of female participants claimed they would pick John, a shy and inexperienced nice guy, over Mike, a stereotypical bad boy; only 18% chose Mike over John.

These studies, however, examine women’s expressed preferences at the expense of their actual behavior. In other words, neither of these studies observes the actual selections made by women in real-life situations. Instead, they observe only the claimed inclinations that arise in a contrived setting. The results of these studies even recognize the distinction. The same participants who overwhelmingly expressed interest in “Nice Guy John” over “Bad Boy Mike” acknowledged that many of their own acquaintances had chosen to date bad boys over nice guys and that bad boys in general tend to have more sexual partners than nice guys (Herold and Milhausen 1999). A comment from the qualitative portion of the Urbaniak and Kilmann (2003) study exemplifies this general discrepancy between expressed preferences and actual behavior: one woman notes that while the nice guy is clearly the more sensible choice, she would choose the bad boy because she “always go[es] for the wilder type of guy” (423). These studies, more than anything else, demonstrate that there is an important distinction between what women say they want and what women actually select in their partners.

The concept of a bad boy “threshold” bridges the discrepancy between these two apparently contradictory sets of studies. The incongruity between expressed preference and actual behavior, in other words, becomes consistent once we consider the idea of “exceeding the threshold.” Women appreciate nice guy qualities, but only if a certain minimum of bad boy qualities is already satisfied. The female partners of the male participants in the Bogaert and Fisher (1995) study likely would have preferred if the men had displayed nice guy qualities as well; ultimately, however, the men displaying only bad boy qualities were able to obtain relatively many female sexual partners, whereas the male participants displaying only nice guy qualities achieved less sexual success. Given a choice between an individual displaying only bad boy qualities and one displaying only nice guy qualities, it seems a woman will select the bad boy. We can conclude, then, that a woman’s claim to want a nice guy is actually a desire for a bad boy who treats her as if he were a nice guy, not a desire for a nice guy on his own. Although the attractiveness of nice guy qualities is understandable, these qualities are worth very little on their own.

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o explain and further develop the findings of these scientific studies, we turn to the field of evolutionary biology. This field supports the concept of a bad boy threshold. Evolutionary biology will help us put behavior and genetics side by side. In other words, one way to understand the inadequacy of nice qualities is by juxtaposing them with the bad boy’s genetics and resources. We can see the necessary threshold in a number of scenarios. For instance, commitment, the trait of dedicating resources to a single partner (Buss 1994), is irrelevant if the man does not have a minimum number of resources to commit. Likewise, a man who is dependable and stable may be considerate enough to defend his mate against other male aggressors, but on its own “consideration” is insufficient unless accompanied by some minimum of physical strength to defend the woman (Buss 1994). We can even see this concept of a minimum bad boy threshold in the dichotomy between compatibility and health: compatibility in, say, successful parenting strategies (Buss 1994) matters little if the male is too sickly to contribute to the parenting. These examples, while admittedly extreme, illustrate circumstances in which nice guy qualities without corresponding bad boy attributes would potentially jeopardize a woman’s reproductive success. These examples all indicate that a woman must seek an individual who first meets some baseline bad boy threshold before his “niceness” can be considered.

Studies show that this minimum bad boy threshold is even higher when a woman is under one of two related circumstances. What’s more, these two circumstances might best represent her desires for a mate. The first occurs when she is explicitly seeking a short-term sexual encounter; the second, when she is at the most fertile point of her menstrual cycle. The first instance may seem perplexing: evolutionary programming might otherwise predispose women to favor the male child-rearing assistance that comes from long-term relationships (Buss 1994) over the short-term sexual encounter. But this merely illustrates the importance of the bad boy trait: individuals whom women find suitable for short-term sexual involvement must be especially desirable to compensate because of that lack of investment. When seeking these short-term sexual flings, women have been found to place greater emphasis on body symmetry (Thornhill & Gangestad 1994; Gangestad & Thornhill 1997; as cited in Little et al. 2002), facial symmetry (Little et al. 2002), and physical attractiveness (Simpson and Gangestad 1992, as cited in Little et al. 2002). These are all benchmarks of quality bad-boy genetics.

A study by Gangestad et al. (2004) suggests that women may be more inclined to engage in these short-term relationships while at the high-fertility phase of their menstrual cycle. During this stage of peak fertility, women have been found to prefer the same symmetrical and physically attractive features as when seeking a short term fling (reviewed in Gangestad et al. 2004), as well as the dominant male behavioral displays (Gangestad et al. 2004) that distinguish a bad boy. Since the biological goal of sexual intercourse is to pass on one’s genetic makeup to one’s offspring, the female’s preference for a mate is most relevant during this high-fertility portion of the menstrual cycle when she is most likely to become pregnant. The biological implications of female preferences while seeking a short-term fling and while at the high-fertility point of the menstrual cycle therefore render these conditions as particularly relevant indicators of true female desires for a mate. Studies such as those by Gangestad et al. (2004) show that, under these circumstances, the minimum bad boy threshold only increases.

But to argue that the bad boy threshold exists even when a woman is seeking a long-term relationship does not imply that this threshold is absolute. The above evidence actually suggests that in conditions such as long-term relationships, the bad boy threshold is relatively lower. Nevertheless, bad boys remain attractive because they have the potential to fulfill the female ideal: a bad boy who acts like a nice guy. This conception of the female ideal might rankle advocates for nice guy success. Supporters here may suggest that nice guys have certain advantages with particular kinds of women – women who, for example, adopt a more restricted socio-sexual orientation that promotes long-term mating. For such women, we might expect the nice guy’s commitment and parental investment to be crucial (Bogaert & Fisher 1995). However, because by definition the shortcomings of bad boys are behavioral and the shortcomings of nice guys are genetic, bad boys can overcome their deficiencies by modifying their actions. Nice guys, contrarily, have no such option. For example, bad boys can compensate for a lack of features typically signifying high parental investment (such as a feminine facial structure) by signifying commitment in other ways. The importance of demonstrating commitment might account for why men are culturally expected to purchase an expensive engagement ring or even to perform the marriage proposal (Buss 1994). The deficiency of nice guys, on the other hand, is genetic or resource-related; nice guys cannot compensate for a lack of features indicating good genetics or bountiful resources nearly as easily as bad boys can compensate for their behavioral shortcomings. Essentially, an individual’s level of bad boy is largely predetermined by his genetic makeup and social status, whereas the same individual’s level of nice guy can fluctuate according to his behavior. This means that, in pursuing a bad boy in any relationship, a sufficiently desirable woman has the potential to obtain the ideal: a mate who exceeds a certain bad boy threshold but still treats her as if he were a nice guy. By contrast, a woman pursuing a nice guy has little hope that he will ever become more desirably “bad.”

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he advantages held by bad boys do not necessarily preclude nice guy success, however. Although James Bond and Jesse James may indeed possess a certain allure, not every highly desirable man embodies the stereotypical bad boy persona. In fact, some very sought-after bachelors not only avoid the distinction of bad boy but even portray themselves as veritable nice guys. For example, notable Hollywood heartthrobs like Ryan Gosling and Ryan Reynolds manage to generate enormous sex appeal while simultaneously cultivating a reputation of kindness and sensitivity, at the very least in the romantic characters they portray in films. These are nice guys who certainly do not finish last. Nevertheless, these nice guys also exhibit the physical symmetry and access to resources characteristic of the bad boy, thus placing them safely above nearly every woman’s own personal bad boy threshold. The great variation in degrees of success achieved by nice guys suggests that niceness itself is not an *unattractive* characteristic but is simply insufficient to garner female attention on its own. Contrary to popular wisdom, then, the complex nature of female attraction can perhaps best be summarized as follows: nice guys may or may not finish last, but nice guys who also exceed a certain bad boy threshold are in fact very likely to finish first.

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