
5-29-1998

Evolutionary Psychology and Psychological Explanation: Newest Wine in an Old Bottle

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp>



Part of the [Other Psychology Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

(1998) "Evolutionary Psychology and Psychological Explanation: Newest Wine in an Old Bottle," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 4 : Iss. 21 , Article 2.
Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol4/iss21/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Bulletin of Political Psychology by an authorized administrator of Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact commons@erau.edu.

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Title: Evolutionary Psychology and Psychological Explanation: Newest Wine in an Old Bottle

Author: Editor

Volume: 4

Issue: 21

Date: 1998-05-29

Keywords: Evolutionary Psychology, Explanation, Interpretation

Abstract. This article contends that theories of evolutionary psychology do not escape two flaws in approaches to psychological explanation.

Theories of evolutionary psychology attempt to explain aspects of psychological phenomena through theories of modern evolutionary theory. The presence or absence, contingency or a contingency, and strength or weakness of psychological phenomena are alleged to be dependent on natural selection, adaptation, and more recently-discussed processes and states such as exaptation, spandrels, and functionless by-products.

Currently, there is very significant dialogue among evolutionary psychological theoreticians about the relative roles and import of these processes and states contributing psychological explanation. (1) When and how often are exaptations, spandrels, or adaptations more theoretically robust? (2) Can developmental sequences of genetic-environmental interactions become well-delineated through research? (3) Can inherited variants facilitating environmental survival become well-delineated from those variants directly facilitating reproductive success? (4) Can a specific adaptation's environment of evolutionary adaptedness be well-delineated? (5) Can constraints on optimal design such as (a) time lags between a new adaptive problem and the evolution of a mechanism designed to solve it or (b) the coordination of adaptations with other mechanisms be well-delineated in specific cases? (6) Can confusions and difficulties be resolved in specific situations about the current utility and past functionality (active or inactive) of exaptations and adaptations?

An ever-widening range of psychological phenomena--e.g., superior female spatial location memory, landscape preferences, and sex differences in sexual fantasy--have been treated to evolutionary psychological analyses and attempts at addressing the above questions. However, one might agree that two flaws of past approaches to psychological explanation--psychodynamic, behavioral, cognitive, humanistic, and existential--remain.

First, as with many criminal justice system investigations (prosecutorial and defense) data collection and interpretation seems an exercise not in seeking the truth, a truth, or even a resonating narrative, but in making a case. Second, psychological explanation is founded on the presumption of meaning--overarching evolutionary constructs as opposed to unconscious dynamics, conditioning history, self-actualization, or meaning itself. That psychological functioning has no rhyme nor reason--even if one's phenomenology suggests otherwise--is not entertained. Note here that even existential philosophies that attempt to address the notion that there is no meaning have not escaped the confines of defining nothing as something that is not something.

A revolution as opposed to an evolution in psychological explanation, for psychobiography, psychohistory, and political psychology, awaits the same intellectual breakthrough as awaits one in cosmology--resolving the meaning of before the beginning when before the beginning there is no beginning nor end. (See Buss, D.M., Haselton, M.G., Shackelford, T.K., Bleske, A.L., & Wakefield, J.C. (1998). Adaptations, exaptations, and spandrels. *American Psychologist*, 53, 533-548; Ellis, B.J., &

International Bulletin of Political Psychology

Symons, D. (1990). Sex differences in sexual fantasy: An evolutionary psychological approach. *Journal of Sex Research*, 27, 527-556; Orions, G.H., & Heerwagen, J.H. (1992). Evolved responses to landscapes. In J.H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, & J. Tooby (Eds.), *The adapted mind* (pp. 55-580). NY: Oxford University Press; Silverman, I., & Eals, M. (1992). Sex differences in spatial abilities: Evolutionary theory and data. In J.H. Barkow, L. Cosmides, & J. Tooby (Eds.), *The adapted mind* (pp. 533-549). NY: Oxford University Press.)
(Keywords: Evolutionary Psychology, Explanation, Interpretation.)