

Evolutionary psychology essay sample



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Evolutionary differences can be explained in the same terms as the principles of natural selection. However, rather than relying on physical features and characteristics that increase the likelihood of leaving genetic material to future generations (i. e. having grandchildren) evolutionary psychology stresses the importance of favorable psychological and behavioral traits. Like their physical counterparts, these socially malleable personality traits increase the likelihood of success in the ability to adapt to a changing environment and ultimately reproduce themselves in successive generations. These dominant genes have allowed ancestors to adapt to changes to life in social contexts much in the same way dominant and preferable physical traits ensured longevity in the past.

As a classic “ chicken and egg” argument, this “ nature vs. nurture” debate fuels the incendiary disconnect between evolutionary explanations of behaviors and ones that rely on permutations that are cultural in origin. However, as noted in our text, Sex and Gender, under the article, “ Does Evolutionary Theory Explain Sex Differences in Humans”, the goal of evolutionary psychology is to “ gain understanding of the evolutionary processes underlying cultural phenomenon.”

In other words, this idea of an evolutionary “ undercurrent” accounting for cultural behaviors may be vital to reconcile these two arguments; that the two can in fact coexist (i. e. otherwise known as “ coevolution”.) As noted in my Social Psychology Study Guide: “...what biology initiates, culture accentuates.” Yet, like many schools of thoughts, each side of the argument prefers to be on top, as the dominant driving force, rather than an afterthought or a “ by-the-way”.

Egos die hard when theories are being tested. And that is precisely what this article states, that “ evolutionary psychologists argue that by examining contemporary manifestations of differences between the sexes, evolutionary theories can be tested.” This point is paramount to the debate: theories can be tested, but not proven. The wide chasm between social and biological science may never truly be bridged, only roped together with postulated threads of reasoning. And oftentimes, this professed reasoning is backward, “...using contemporary data to devise hypotheses about the past.” (Fausto-Sterling pg. 86)

Defining Culture

In taking a look at culture, it can be defined as “ the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man’s capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations” (Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary Online, keyword culture). The expectations we’ve carved out for ourselves defines gender roles, and in a larger capacity, norms. In addition, it is the “ totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions, and all other products of human work and thought.” In essence, it is the nature of our nature.

And, underscoring human nature is the sum of our behaviors, thoughts and beliefs, which are by definition what makes up part of our culture. The two are inextricably woven together and that is why reconciling this issue is so much of challenge.

In addition, our incendiary disposition (not necessarily unique to Homo sapiens) has sparked much debate and verve for many things political,

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religious and in terms of evolutionary principles, our sexual behaviors. We are in fact, like Narcissus, enamored with our own reflections of ourselves; seeking answers to universal questions of who and why we are. From selecting our partners, careers and making other lifelong choices, we are continually finding new ways to worship the Self and those behaviors that preserve it.

Example: Gender Differences in Aggressive Behavior

From the classroom to the boardroom, “ behavior is defined as inappropriate on the basis of how it is perceived in a specific environment” (Festinger, 1954.) An act of “ aggression” in the inner city or barrio may seem perfectly within the bounds of acceptability (even to the point of being encouraged), than from someone with a higher set of “ standards”, namely redeemable convictions and qualities we expect from a civilized society. As such, we typically and somewhat prejudicially assign aggressive tendencies to those of a more physical and violent nature. In truth, many forms of aggression can be just as caustic and subsequently destructive without being overt as a slap to the face.

In the animal kingdom, from an evolutionary vantage point, we tend to think of aggression in terms of the male fighting: for a mate, in general, during hormonally-charged battles where a victor makes off with a harem of fertile females. But then, the ladies can be just as aggressive, altruistically fighting an intruder to save their young.

One factor became evident in looking at human comparisons: examples of female aggression and resultant studies were difficult to locate for

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comparative discussion and conclusion. Conversely, there was a plethora of articles devoted to men and boys (possibly in light of public scrutiny with regards to “ disorders du jour” such as ADHD and CD [Conduct Disorder]; i. e. the market has created a pull-through effect for these topics and therefore we see them published more frequently.)

This gender bias is due to the generally accepted ideology that men and boys are more physically aggressive than girls and women (Hudley, 1994) while the latter tend to be more subtle in their tactics, resorting to more verbal means of abuse (Cairnes, Cairnes, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989) More than likely, male androgens, namely testosterone account for this disparity.

Inherent differences in gender-specific methods of aggression don't require superfluous or exhaustive research, nor do they warrant further peer review. Any further discussion becomes hyperbole. Institutions in a host of psychological disciplines have generally accepted this stereotype, backed by sound research and data.

For example, the propensity to commit murder is 10 times higher in males than in females (Garabarino, 1999). A supportive survey, conducted by the Centers for Disease Control found that males were more likely than females to have carried a gun in the last 30 days (CDC: 1999a). Obviously, a bullet is more lethal than a scathingly delivered racial slur, hence the higher percentages of morbidity seen with gun use.

However, in the wide spectrum that represents humanity, there are always exceptions. One such case was noted in an article entitled, The Relationship
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Between Patients' Gender and Violence Leading to Staff Injuries (Lam, Mc Niel, and Binder, 2000). The study concluded with the suggestion that, where psychiatric patients were concerned,

the rate of incidence was equal between the genders, even hypothesizing that attacks by female patients were more "assaultive" (sic) than those from the men included in the studies (Binder, Mc Niel, 1990). I would hope these are women, who due to their disorderly conduct and inability to nurture a child and family won't in fact reproduce, thus passing down a probable predisposition for a mental disorder. As prejudicial as this statement is, I find it to be a valid one.

Modern Cultural Differences

Evolution seeks to explain and account for behaviors, culminated over millennia, and countless generations of populations. In her opposing view to the argument of evolutionary theory explaining sexual differences, Anne Fausto-Sterling points out evolutionary explanations are simultaneously reductionist (sic). She writes:

Evolutionary explanations of difference often entail elegant theories based on very partial knowledge of contemporary cultures and on analogies from animals, but without any foundation in the specific history of human evolution. There are no studies of human evolution comparable to those on red deer or chimpanzees.

We can only infer probable cause when looking at our past ancestry. Throughout the ages, we've gone through too many cultural shifts and

paradigms to account for one clear explanation of human behavior- evolutionary or otherwise. For example, consider a more contemporary state of affairs: the cultural shift from the 1950's through the 1970's. Domestic "Diva-dom" reached an apex of acceptability in the 1940's and 1950's.

It was the dawn of the Nuclear Family, post-Cold War, where a man's place was in the workplace, and a woman could find her salvation in a suburban domicile replete with the latest GE appliances and gadgets. Same story, new dishwasher. Shiny cars, drawn from the dreams of the atomic age, became our phallic totems-man's incessant need to impress the female and out-manuever the alpha male. Magazines like LIFE mirrored idyllic lifestyles seen nightly on network TV. From 1852 to 1952, little had changed in the representation of gender roles. From vacuums to Campbell Soup, and Ivory Soap, women reigned supreme in their homes as they had for the last century.

The resonance of change delivered from women like Abigail Adams and Elizabeth Cady Stanton had diminished to a whimper. But it would soon pick up momentum in the social upheaval, on all fronts, once the 1960's began. "The Battle of the Sexes" made for good publicity and social commentary. If only the question was as easy to answer as it was for Billie Jean King to beat Bobby Riggs on a tennis court. Empowerment of women, of this "feminine mystique" as the noted feminist Betty Friedan describes, is not without its downfall and struggle.

Woman in the 21st century are still trying to accomplish what is expected of them, juggling careers, families and personal liberties. Some aspect of our

lives must always be sacrificed at the expense of another. This relatively late concept of “having it all” is a myth, born out of frustration of living in a male-dominated society. The key is to be satisfied in whatever role one needs to play at the appropriate time in one’s life. Whether that includes the one of wife, mother or whore. Luckily, our generation can make these choices. The ones before it did not. So, was this evolutionary based or culturally based? We may never know. Or at least agree.