

EVOLUTIONARY THEORY AND APPLIED PSYCHOLOGY

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Why should applied psychologists pay attention to evolutionary theory? There are three reasons. The first reason is that evolutionary theory offers an explanation for organizational behavior that challenges the conventional wisdom of applied psychology, and it is always good to challenge conventional wisdom. The conventional wisdom holds that what people do depends on the circumstances they are in. The circumstances are primarily defined by: (1) a person's role in an organization, and (2) the agenda for the meeting the person is in. In this model, personality is essentially irrelevant because what a person does is defined by situations and circumstances.

This model is the explanation of choice for I/O psychologists, and it is also the model that is preferred by the government and other large organizations. Consider the topic of leadership, which is arguably the most important problem in the organizational sciences. For the military, if a person is in a role that is senior to the role of others, that person is a leader, by definition. The same model holds for most organizations, including the Postal Service and your university. And this model is patently wrong, because putting a person in a leadership role does not turn that person into a leader. That fact means that we need to look elsewhere for explanations of social behavior.

Evolutionary theory explains social behavior in terms of factors inside people. We refer to these factors as "personality". To talk about structures inside people sets us on a reductionist course, so that the next question concerns where the structures come from. If we specify the structures in terms of scores on well-validated measures of personality, then the answer is clear. The structures inside people reflect the influence of individual learning experiences AND genetics. Twin studies for the last 30 years reliably show that 30% to 50% of the variance in the scores on well-validated measures of intelligence, temperament, vocational interests, or personality can be explained in terms of genetic factors. This is a fact; people who ignore this fact are candidates for membership in the flat earth society, and this is the first reason for paying attention to evolutionary theory.

The second reason for paying attention to evolutionary theory is to find out what it has to say that actually matters. And here is where the argument starts to get interesting. Many researchers who study genetic influences on organizational behavior spend their time showing that job satisfaction, core self-esteem, leadership, social potency, organizational citizenship, or any other favored variable has a genetic component. That is very useful information because it shows that the situationist argument is incomplete. But having demonstrated that situational explanations are incomplete, then what? The answer is, "Not much." This increasingly popular research agenda involves endless replications of a particular exercise—showing that one individual difference measure after another has a genetic component. There are no policy implications that follow from this exercise.

The third reason for paying attention to evolutionary theory is more substantive. Evolutionary theory maintains that people evolved in response to certain environmental pressures, that there is a characteristic human nature with a stable and universal core. People are pretty much the same everywhere and they react in quite similar ways to the recurring vicissitudes of life. However, the world has changed since people first evolved, we are adapted to circumstances that no longer exist, we conduct our lives in social arrangements that are sometimes inconsistent with human nature, and an enlightened approach to leadership and organizational psychology will take this fact into account.

Consider the following example. On March 16th, 2006, in Halabja, Iraq (which is in the northern part of the country), the normally peaceful Kurds gathered to commemorate March 16th, 1988, the day when Saddam Hussein's government used poison gas to murder more than 5,000 people. On March 16th, 2006, furious Kurds overwhelmed their security force and destroyed a local museum dedicated to the memory of the Halabja massacre. This apparently anomalous behavior illustrates three principles about human nature as identified by evolutionary theory. The details are as follows. First, after the mass murders in 1988, the Kurdish citizens donated money for a relief fund, a pool of money to be used to aid the survivors of the massacre. Second, over the following 15 years, the local Kurdish politicians stole the money. And third, upon learning of this, the betrayed citizens of Halabja reacted with moralistic fury.

These events reflect three features of human nature that are a commonplace of evolutionary psychology. First, people have the capacity for spontaneous altruism and compassion toward members of their tribe or family who have been unjustly injured—this is known as reciprocal altruism, and it is a powerful (and I think noble) natural sentiment. Second, the people who are in charge, the ruling elite of virtually any human group, will steal if they have a chance—these tendencies toward kleptocracy are the product of the powerful and not very attractive human propensity toward selfishness. Third, by virtue of their evolutionary history as group living animals, people are innately sensitive to signs of deceit and betrayal in relationships, they are innately sensitive to signs of injustice and programmed to react to injustice with moralistic aggression.

Everyday life is full of examples of the spontaneous expression of natural human tendencies. For example, nationalism and prejudice—the tendency to support the in-group and despise the out-group—along with the pursuit of status and recognition are important tendencies rooted in our evolutionary history. Although it is difficult, if not impossible, to eliminate these tendencies through training, it is relatively easy to anticipate how they might create problems in an organization, but only if one understands that situations offer a partial explanation of social behavior.

I don't have the time or the patience to list all the innate tendencies that impact human performance in organizations. In any case, that's not my point. My point is to suggest why evolutionary theory is important for applied psychology. Evolutionary theory clearly shows that there are limits to human plasticity, there are inevitable and crucial constraints on organizational arrangements, there are clear boundaries to social engineering. And this generalization is true in two ways. First, it means that people are not fungible across organizational roles—certain people will fit certain roles better than others. For example, certain people will perform better in leadership roles than others, a generalization that utterly eludes our government agencies.

Second, and more importantly, certain organizational structures will facilitate human performance, and other organizational structures will degrade human performance. For example, at the level of the world historical stage, communism has failed as a model for social organizations—and it failed largely because the communists believe people are social, not biological organisms. That is, communism failed because it ignores human nature. But at the level of the organizations where you work, many if not most of the organizational arrangements were dreamed up by accountants as ways to reduce costs. That is, they were designed without paying much attention to how they would impact the incumbents. However, the effectiveness of matrix management, of self-managed work groups, of quality circles, and all the other arbitrary social arrangements dreamed up by business consultants depends entirely on the degree to which they are compatible with human nature. And human nature is defined in terms of our genetic endowment. Certain social arrangements—and they are almost always fundamentally democratic—facilitate human performance. Other arrangements—and they are almost always arbitrary, hierarchical, and authoritarian—degrade performance, and alienate incumbents.