A LINE ON LIFE

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In Our Genes *

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There are many different ways of explaining social behavior. Many social psychologists emphasize learning and the current cultural patterns. **Evolutionary psychologists** explain social behaviors in terms of the evolutionary origins of humans.

In 1994, psychologist David Buss studied 37 cultures on six continents. He wanted to find factors – other than learning, socialization, attachment, or culture – that influenced our choice of mates. There were several common threads among all of these cultures. In contrast to women, men are more likely to –

- be more interested in casual sex,
- prefer younger, more physically attractive partners, and
- get more jealous over imagined sexual infidelities than a loss of emotional commitment.

In contrast, women are more likely to –

- prefer slightly older partners who seem industrious, higher in status, or economically prosperous,
- be upset with a partner becoming emotionally involved with someone else rather than merely being sexually unfaithful.

If these similar attitudes exist across different cultures, this suggests that something more basic to all humans determines these behaviors. (Do these attitudes sound familiar?)

Evolutionary psychologists see this as part of the different reproductive challenges faced by men and women. For men, reproduction depends on their mate's fertility. Therefore men look for younger, healthier women. Of course, the more female partners a man can have, the more children he can sire. However, if his partner mates with other men, he does not know if he is supporting *his* offspring.

In contrast, women need to spend more time and effort in raising children. They are looking for a man with greater resources who will stay with them. If their man becomes emotionally involved with another woman, this may lead to fewer available resources.

An extreme form of evolutionary psychology – **sociobiology** – is advocated by Harvard zoologist, Edward Wilson. He believes that social behavior has evolved to maximize

fitness for survival. For example, organisms that compete for food, territory, and mates are more likely to survive and reproduce. Gradually, the offspring will develop an inborn trait of competitiveness. Sociobiologists think that many human traits have evolved this way. They are "*in our genes*."

Imagine a military patrol on a battlefield. Suddenly a grenade is tossed into their midst. Without hesitation, one man falls on the grenade, sacrificing his life while shielding the others. How can these altruistic actions be explained in terms of evolution?

Sociobiologists explain the soldier's heroism by pointing out altruistic suicides in other species. When a honeybee stings an intruder to protect the hive, that bee will die. However, genes shared with the other bees are more likely to survive. Similarly, humans will sacrifice themselves, so relatives – who share common genes – will survive. Even if soldiers do not share common genes, altruistic behavior can still occur, because it is already in our genes.

The sociobiological view can be taken to its extreme. Rather than the genes ensuring our survival, it is as if our bodies are hulking machines to ensure the survival of the genes. We are here to ensure *their* survival.

Sociobiology offers a different way of viewing human behavior. However, some of its views are questionable. It is more likely that evolution has promoted the development of the human brain, not specific behavioral traits. The brain is linked to intelligence. In turn, intelligence makes us more resourceful, adaptable and flexible. Rather than strict genetic programming, our intelligence seems to have more to do with our ability to survive.

Another criticism is that genetic changes take thousands of years to occur. This is much too slow to explain the rapid spread of ideas, traditions and cultural patterns. Altruism (as in our example) is needed for our society to last. However, rather than holding our genes responsible, these selfless acts can just as easily be explained by learning.

From the position of sociobiology, any attempt to correct social injustices is discouraged.

Lastly, sociobiology supports the ***status quo***. If social behavior is determined by our genes, this discourages any effort to change cultural norms. Wilson believes that men are more aggressive than women. This gives him a discouraging view of the role of women in our culture.

> *"Even with identical education and equal access to all professions, men are more likely to continue to play a disproportionate role in political life, business, and science."*

If you are a woman, this probably makes you angry. As a man, you might be angry for the women in your life – your mother, sisters, daughters, wife and/or female friends.

Much of this boils down to the basic question of which is more important – nature or nurture, heredity or environment, genetics or learning? All are important. There is a constant interaction between these factors.

The "*survival of the fittest*" principle even applies to ideas. To many, it seems that sociobiology needs to evolve a great deal, if it is going to survive.

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* Adapted from Dennis Coon's *Introduction to Psychology: Exploration and Application*, Brooks/Cole Publishing, 1998, pages 660-661, 702-703.