Evolutionary Psychology Overview

Jay Gould 4/26/04

Evolutionary psychology is *the study of the evolutionary bases of behavior and mind.* It is the most recent major development in psychology. Indeed, it is a new theoretical perspective that is likely to be quite influential in the years to come.

Evolutionary psychology began to take form in the mid to late 1980s, and "by the mid 1990s, it became clear that psychology was witnessing the birth of its first major, new *theoretical perspective* since the cognitive revolution in the 1950s and 1960s." (Weiten, 2001, p. 16) Interestingly, however, evolutionary psychology would seem to be a reflection of William James' *Functionalism* a hundred years earlier (at the birth of American psychology), which itself had its bases in Charles Darwin's Theory of Evolution by Natural Selection.

More contemporarily, evolutionary psychology has its roots in sociobiology, the study of the *biological bases for social behavior* in every species. But evolutionary psychology is distinguished by a shift in focus from behaviors to *underlying cognitive mechanisms.* Moreover, evolutionary psychologists do not believe that all behaviors are driven by *genetic mechanisms,* but rather that the brain has built into it *adaptations* that are of a more general nature, i.e., that are a *set of rules* that govern behavior.

Evolutionary psychology can be defined as the theoretical perspective that examines behavioral and mental processes in terms of their *adaptive value* for a species over the course of many generations, which for humans relates particularly to our *hunter-gatherer ancestors* of the last 100,000 or so years. Its basic premise is that natural selection favors *behaviors* and *cognitive/information-processing modules of the mind* that enhance the *reproductive success* of organisms, i.e., the passing on of *genes* to the next generation.

As with all prominent theoretical perspectives in psychology, evolutionary psychology has its critics. It has been argued, e.g., that evolutionary explanations are *post hoc* accounts that are untestable. However, evolutionary psychologists have made persuasive rebuttals to theses and other criticisms, and the evolutionary perspective is rapidly gaining acceptance.

It is my position that when evolutionary psychology is used in conjunction with other theoretical approaches, i.e., *schools of thought,* it is likely that science will more successfully move forward toward the goal of having an accurate and complete understanding, for both human and non-human species, of the mechanisms and principles of behavior and the mind.

In essence, it is a matter of addressing not only immediate and developmental causes, i.e., *proximate mechanisms*, but also adaptive significance and evolutionary history, i.e., *ultimate mechanisms*. These *different levels of explanation* are interrelated and complement one another, they are not competing, mutually exclusive explanations of behavior and mental processes.