

Evolutionary Psychology

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Book Review

Ultimate Answers for Common Questions

A review of Alan S. Miller and Satoshi Kanazawa, *Why Beautiful People Have More Daughters*. Penguin Group: New York, 2007, US\$23.95, 252 pp. ISBN 978-0-399-53365-5

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Among the growing evolutionary literature for the general public, Miller and Kanazawa's book differs from the competition by targeting a wider audience through its direct application of evolutionary concepts to answer common questions and mysteries about human behavior. *Why Beautiful People Have More Daughters* is presented in an engaging and straightforward manner to bring evolutionary science into the lives of your next-door neighbors. Using a question-and-answer format, Miller and Kanazawa present the latest empirical findings on a wide range of topics from near and dear areas such as mating and family (e.g., why men like blonde bombshells, why diamonds are a girl's best friend) to less explored matters like religion and politics (e.g., why women are more religious than men, why most suicide bombers are Muslim). Readers are left with a taste of how evolutionary influences permeate nearly every facet of daily life.

The authors recommend reading the two introductory chapters as a theoretical launch pad before perusing later topics of interest. Each of the subsequent chapters contains several questions whose answers are organized into general topic areas (e.g., violence, family issues). A unique feature of this book is that each topic is independent and can be read in any order. Throughout, the authors use their background in sociology to provide a dual perspective, pitting Standard Social Science Model (SSSM) explanations against ultimate, evolutionary explanations. They include many fascinating and less-known examples that help engage non-academics (e.g., did you know that the speech that helped produce the Native American environmentalism stereotype was a hoax written by a white screenwriter?). Most notably, the authors' enthusiasm for evolutionary psychology is contagious and easily recognizable by anyone who has already been captivated by its explanatory power.

In the *Introduction*, Miller and Kanazawa emphasize the importance of two issues: the interaction of nature and nurture, and the necessity of avoiding the Naturalistic and Moralistic fallacies so that science may progress. With their background in sociology, the authors highlight the overabundance of environmental determinists in the social sciences (and the parallel lack of genetic determinists), concluding that human behavior is neither

solely governed by individual experience nor innate human nature. Additionally, the authors pinpoint an axiom that every evolutionary psychologist has observed: what may seem immoral and offensive may nonetheless be characteristic of human nature and worthy of close examination.

In *Chapter 1: What is Evolutionary Psychology*, the authors explain four key differences between SSSM-generated and evolutionarily driven theories. Many social scientists premise their hypotheses with the beliefs that (1) humans are exempt from biological principles to which other animals are subjected, (2) evolution does not affect the human brain, (3) humans are born as a blank slate, and (4) nearly all human behavior is the product of environmental factors. The authors illustrate the implicit errors in each of the above premises throughout their discussion of psychological mechanisms. The chapter concludes with the Savannah Principle, stressing the relevance of the environment of evolutionary adaptedness to physical and psychological adaptations we observe today.

In *Chapter 2: Why Are Men and Women So Different?*, the authors use the principles of anisogamy and internal gestation to explain sex differences in fitness variance (defined as the difference between reproductive “winners” and “losers”) and how they affect cultural universals, such as polygyny and differences in parental investment. The authors also address the SSSM issue of sex differences and gender socialization: “men and women are not different because they are socialized differently; they are socialized differently because they are [innately] different (p. 32).” Further, Miller and Kanazawa turn the SSSM theorists’ cherished rebuttal, ‘culture,’ upside down by citing it as an adaptation used in lieu of typical anatomical defense mechanisms like razor-sharp teeth and claws.

Although the authors devote much attention to the difference between a traditional, sociological framework and an evolutionary one, they only briefly touch on the theoretical foundations of evolutionary psychology. Fundamental processes like natural selection, sexual selection, and inclusive fitness stir up many misunderstandings and therefore deserve a more thorough explanation in the introductory chapters, especially since these processes form the backbone of evolutionarily generated explanations provided in later chapters. If scientists attempt to convey to laypersons an accurate understanding of evolutionary psychology, its theoretical underpinnings must be elaborated sufficiently. In the same vein, more attention should have been given to combating common misconceptions in evolutionary psychology (e.g., evolution is random, survival of the species). Not only would these clarifications thwart misguided readers from interpreting evolutionary explanations as “just-so” stories, they would provide a more accurate portrayal of our field.

In their introductory chapters, Miller and Kanazawa justify their focus on the biological side of the nature-nurture interaction by citing the preponderance of research in sociology devoted to societal and situational influences. Although academics can maintain an interactionist perspective, readers from the general population may forget the authors’ intention and perceive many explanations as genetic determinism (especially since the authors admittedly claim to ignore environmental influences). Thus, many readers could have benefited from more illustrations throughout the text of how cultural and situational inputs interact with the proposed evolved psychological mechanisms. Nonspecialist readers need to be frequently reminded of the true interactionist character of evolutionary

psychology if they are to come away with an accurate understanding of the field.

Chapter 3: Barbie- Manufactured by Mattel, Designed by Evolution: The Evolutionary Psychology of Sex and Mating begins with a summary of many characteristics that typically define a woman's physical attractiveness (e.g., long hair, small waist, large breasts). The authors cite several classic studies that identify the health correlates of these qualities and their significance in determining a woman's reproductive value and fertility. Furthermore, Miller and Kanazawa cite cross-cultural and developmental evidence that these preferences are the product of activated evolved mechanisms, refuting predictions made by SSSM theorists. The chapter concludes with an explanation of why men desire a variety of mates (thus providing an ultimate explanation for why pornography and prostitution are overwhelmingly consumed by men) and how sex differences in cognitive architecture lead to conflict, such as men's adaptive and systematic tendency to over-perceive sexual interest on the part of women.

As their titles indicate, *Chapter 4: Go Together Like a Horse and Carriage? The Evolutionary Psychology of Marriage* and *Chapter 5: Some Things are More Important Than Money: The Psychology of the Family*, provide a broad overview of family-related research. The authors expound on topics like why various degrees of polygyny are found cross-culturally compared to the relative absence of polyandry, and male adaptations to female infidelity, ranging from sperm competition tactics (e.g., testes size) to the consequences of paternity uncertainty (e.g., tendency to remark on the father's resemblance to the baby). They also describe how parents' present condition (i.e., high or low status, degree of physical attractiveness) tends to influence the sex-ratio of their offspring by producing more babies of the sex that best capitalizes on traits inherited from the parents.

Some researchers may object to the logic underlying the last claim that is the source of the book's title—why beautiful people have more daughters. If men who are remarkably attractive can afford a short-term mating strategy, and successful short-term mating males sire more children than successful short-term mating or long-term mating females, then very attractive parents maximize their reproductive success by bestowing their genes for exceptional attractiveness to sons. Of course only the most attractive men can successfully pursue a short-term mating strategy so this logic may only apply to a narrow subset of the population (exceptionally attractive parents); theoretically, however, selective pressure could shape a tendency for very attractive parents to produce more sons, not daughters. Although some data support the authors' interpretation, details such as those that pinpoint parents' relative influence (i.e., would one predict a very attractive mother and high status father to produce more sons or daughters?) and the proximal mechanisms that bias the likelihood of having a son or daughter have yet to be identified.

In *Chapter 6: Guys Gone Wild: The Evolutionary Psychology of Crime and Violence* the authors spotlight how larger fitness variance in men causes an increased selection pressure to engage in activities that improve a man's success in the mating game, many of which involve criminal and violent behavior. As a means to showcase one's status, men are more highly motivated to steal and injure or kill another. This tendency, however, is age-dependent. The majority of risky and overt crimes are committed during late adolescence and early adulthood, a period of peak reproductive activity in men. Similarly, displays of a man's intelligence and creativity are maximized when he is most intensely

perusing the mating market. These advertisements of one's strength and dominance, one's cerebral fitness and robust genome, are all displayed to please a choosy female. Miller and Kanazawa surmise, "There would be no civilizations, no art, no literature, no music, no Beatles, no Microsoft, if sex and mating were a male choice (p. 133)." Once committed to one woman and after children enter the scene, however, effort is redirected toward protecting one's offspring and mate-guarding one's wife (although, as the authors recap, tactics of preventing cuckoldry can also illicit violence and abuse toward wives).

Miller and Kanazawa tackle less explored, macro-level questions in the next two chapters which provide the greatest challenge to resisting the Moralistic Fallacy. In *Chapter 7: Life's Not Fair, or Politically Correct: The Evolutionary Psychology of Political and Economic Inequalities*, SSSM theorists' explanations are compared to evolutionary psychologists' explanations addressing issues that arise in the workplace: why men earn more money than women, why neurosurgeons tend to be male and teachers tend to be female, and why sexual harassment is so persistent. SSSM theorists contend that sex differences in the workplace result from discrimination rather than the tendency for males to enter male-oriented careers and females to enter female-oriented careers. Conversely, evolutionarily driven research suggests a role for innate differences between men and women (e.g., systemizing versus empathizing brains), proclivities that steer individuals toward particular occupations. Additionally, men and women differ in the priority they give to their careers. Men earn more money than women because they are willing to work longer hours, accept riskier jobs, and toil in unpleasant working conditions in order to increase their value as a mate. Increases in a woman's status and resource holdings do little to increase her attractiveness as a mate; thus, her motivation to work in objectionable conditions is relatively weaker. The authors succinctly conclude, "...men make more money because they want to; women make less money because they have better things to do than make money (p. 148)."

Chapter 8: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly: The Evolutionary Psychology of Religion and Conflict encompasses a wide array of topics: racism, religion, suicide bombers, ethnic and nationalist conflict, and sex differences in the proclivity to travel abroad. Miller and Kanazawa's discussion of religion is especially interesting. They cite research suggesting that religion is a byproduct of an error management mechanism referred to as the "animalistic bias" or "agency-detector mechanism." In an ambiguous situation it is more fitness enhancing to over-infer intentional forces of another individual (e.g., someone following you) rather than attributing blame to chance factors (e.g., rustling leaves). Thus, individuals often err on the side of attributing random events to individual intention. And in the case of religion, this agency-detector mechanism has been co-opted to trigger belief in supreme deities.

Miller and Kanazawa close with a list of evolutionary conundrums in *Chapter 9: Stump the Evolutionary Psychologists: A Few Tougher Questions*. The authors address issues such as why people choose to have no children, why people commit suicide, and of course, skeptics' frequently raised question, "What about homosexuality?" They cite several empirical attempts to address these questions while leaving readers with the understanding that evolutionary psychology, like all sciences, is a work in progress with many gaps that beg future exploration.

This book excels in awakening readers to the role of deeper, ultimate answers to many questions that seem so puzzling while highlighting the weaknesses of traditional SSSM explanations. The question-and-answer format provides an effective vehicle for stimulating readers' interest. After reading these chapters, readers will be surprised to learn that many observations that they previously regarded as superficial artifacts of human society actually represent an arsenal of adaptive solutions geared toward increasing one's reproductive success. Additionally, the authors provide an array of colorful and familiar examples facilitating readers' comprehension and appreciation for the realm of phenomena to which evolutionary explanations are applied.

Readers may notice a few shortcomings. One is the failure to sufficiently portray the interactionist nature of our field beyond the introductory chapters. Although the authors warn of this at the beginning, too often answers are presented without the context of environmental inputs. Thus, readers in the habit of viewing the world in black and white may be prone to see evolutionary psychology as a form of genetic determinism. A second regret, as already mentioned, is the missed opportunity to cover some cardinal principles. Perhaps this omission is due to the constraint of the question-and-answer format. As such, the most interesting questions may not demand coverage of such fundamentals as kin selection and reciprocal altruism.

Evolutionary psychologists sometimes hear complaints about their findings such as, "Well, my grandmother could have told me that!" This book invites a wider audience to join us in understanding more deeply why certain intuitions have stood the test of time and in experiencing the excitement of discovering unforeseen explanations. For a beginning primer that opens the mind to the world of evolutionary psychology, Miller and Kanazawa's *Why Beautiful People Have More Daughters* is a great start.