

Evolutionary Psychology

www.epjournal.net – 2008. 6(3): 482-486

Book Review

Can Ideology Save the Angry Caveman?



A review of Martha McCaughey, *The Caveman Mystique: Pop-Darwinism and the Debates over Sex, Violence, and Science*. New York: Routledge, 2007, 167pp, US\$29.95, ISBN 978-0-415-93475-6 (paperback)

Farnaz Kaighobadi, Florida Atlantic University, Department of Psychology, Davie, FL 33314 USA, E-mail: fkaighob@fau.edu (corresponding author)

Todd K. Shackelford, Florida Atlantic University, Department of Psychology, Davie, FL 33314 USA, E-mail: tshackel@fau.edu ¹

Martha McCaughey is Director of Women's Studies at Appalachian State University. In *The Caveman Mystique*, McCaughey questions the scientific utility of evolutionary theories for generating workable explanations of human male psychology. She condemns evolutionary science for producing and maintaining modern men's self-indulgent, sexually aggressive "caveman" identity. According to McCaughey, evolutionary science, in general, and evolutionary psychology, in particular, is a hodge-podge of ideologies built on a biased selection of and reliance on published literature. And yet McCaughey concludes with an ideological definition of a "new manhood" ("*Homo textual*") to which all men should aspire. According to McCaughey, "Men can take a great leap forward and become new kinds of men...This new man [*Homo textual*] understands identity as socially constructed and consequential" (p. 140).

McCaughey's criticisms of evolutionary explanations of human male psychology do not differ from the well-worn "criticisms" leveled by practitioners of standard social science (see Tooby and Cosmides, 1992, for a review and debunking of these criticisms). The standard social science model assumes that the human mind is a product of the social world and that the mind consists of a few general-purpose mechanisms. McCaughey's repeated claim to be familiar with evolutionary theories grants her no discernable insight into the debates between standard social science and evolutionary science. Her ideological biases and muddled thinking are apparent from the Introduction to the book, in which she refers to evolutionary theories with such howlers as "grand narratives," "lived ideologies,"

¹ All editorial decisions were made by Associate Editor David P. Barash

“scientific stories,” “partial political discourses,” and “culture.” Such phrases in fact represent the kind of “narratives” and “partial political discourses” that characterize postmodern approaches to science.

Angry Men Become Cavemen

In chapter one, McCaughey points to several political and economic phenomena that contributed to modern Western man’s “caveman” identity. According to McCaughey, “Masculinity is now more about appearances and consuming than building, contributing, and producing...[T]he caveman is one kind of ornamental display of masculinity, a glamorous expression” (p. 23). McCaughey argues that the increase in women’s wages along with the economic recession of the late 1980s left men feeling inadequate and angry. To dull these feelings, men exchanged their masculine identity for a self-indulgent identity fed by a culture of consumption. According to McCaughey, evolutionary theories of male psychology found a popular place in this new culture, because these theories “rationalized” men’s problematic behaviors. McCaughey offers no empirical evidence to support her speculations (perhaps we should call them “stories” or “narratives”).

McCaughey reviews several tenets of evolutionary theory as applied to human sexual psychology. She appears to be vaguely familiar with them, but her rhetoric overshadows her knowledge. According to McCaughey, “HBE [Human Behavior and Evolution] theorists... are willing to say that men are dogs” (p. 32), and “[HBE theorists] insist that men, in fact, are pigs, and that it has to do with evolution” (p. 33). McCaughey’s distasteful and inaccurate commentary on well-established HBE theories belies her claimed objectivity and announces her apparent disdain for science in general.

Equating Evolutionary Science and Religion?

In chapter two, McCaughey discusses the ethical, social, and political applications of evolutionary theories in modern Western society. She argues that modern science aspires to replace religion as a source of morality and a foundation for ethics. McCaughey argues that, “HBE scholarship can’t actually tell us that much about why we feel or behave as we do, and how we should expect others to behave, but the Judeo-Christian myths in HBE perform that work of manipulating our hopes” (p. 54). Two points need to be addressed regarding McCaughey’s claims about evolutionary theorists’ efforts to provide ethical foundations for society. First, scientists—including HBE theorists—make statistical inferences based on objective evidence to explain behavior. They do not claim absolute *truths* about human nature or offer unchangeable solutions to human moral dilemmas the way most religious ideologies attempt to do. Likening religion to science—even in literary terms—devalues science and grants unwarranted credibility to religion. Second, HBE theorists, like other scientists, use scientific methodology to address questions about the objective world *without* being guided or manipulated by a particular political or social agenda. When presenting their research, evolutionary theorists often include warnings about the risk of committing the “naturalistic fallacy,” the assumption that because something is natural, it is therefore moral (see Alexander, 1979, 1987; Symons 1979; Wright 1994). It is the proponents of the standard social science model—notably practitioners of several branches of feminism and sociology—who are prone to offer grand ideological (normative) statements without supportive empirical evidence. McCaughey’s book is the most recent example of such arrogant nonsense.

McCaughey concludes chapter two by claiming that evolutionary psychology focuses exclusively on male psychology, and that “women figure in the discourse about cavemen as the passive objects of cavemen’s desires and actions” (p. 61). With this claim, McCaughey dismisses a staggeringly large and ever-growing literature on female evolved psychology, including work addressing female mate choice, female-female competition, ovulatory cycle effects on female psychology and behavior, and female infidelity (see, e.g., Campbell, 2002; Hrdy, 1999). Evolutionary theorists do not routinely portray women as the passive sex with an evolved psychology that was built by male psychology and behavior. On the contrary, for example, a sizeable and historically rich literature addresses female mate choice as a key selective pressure that has caused the evolution of male psychology and behavior (e.g., Darwin, 1871; Miller, 1998).

Popular Media and the Fascination with Sex

In chapter three, McCaughey focuses on evolutionary psychological analyses of human male psychology that have been featured in popular media. As McCaughey comments later in the chapter, the media are fascinated with sex and intimate relationships, and she claims that evolutionary theories of sexual behavior are the most popular and alluring. According to McCaughey, “The advertising system co-opts evolutionary discourse, and prevailing ideas of gender difference more generally, in the effort to sell commodities by producing erotically charged desires” (p.72). McCaughey does not cite empirical evidence that evolutionary theories of sexual behavior are invoked or presented by the media more often than non-evolutionary theories, and neither does she provide a clear recommendation for how to limit or prevent media presentation and misrepresentation of scientific work (of which her book appears to be a prime example). Is she recommending implicitly that HBE researchers stop investigating male sexual behavior because the results of this research are presented by the media? Or perhaps she is recommending that HBE theorists prevent public access to the results of such studies?

Biased Review of the Scientific Literature, or Innocent Misunderstanding?

In chapter three, McCaughey claims that HBE theories have been tested only with data collected from white, single, heterosexual men and that “we are simply supposed to take it on faith that the young, white, Western, heterosexual, childless culture of college spring break represents our ancestors’ mating habits” (p. 73). Is McCaughey intentionally dismissing or ignoring the stupendous volume of hard-won cross-cultural data collected by evolutionary psychologists and anthropologists (see e.g. Anderson, 2006; Marlowe, 2003; Schmitt et al., 2003)? Broad swaths of psychological studies secure data from Western college populations. Is McCaughey questioning only those data collected to test evolutionarily-informed hypotheses and, if so, on what grounds?

In chapter four, McCaughey criticizes HBE theories for focusing on heterosexual male behaviors as *natural* adaptations and ignoring homosexuality as an *unnatural* phenomenon: “Current evolutionary narratives provide a framework for making heterosexual behaviors seem more legitimate (more ‘natural’) than others...sexual acts that do not lead to or imitate reproduction (e.g. masturbation, cunnilingus, anal intercourse, sadomasochistic sex) have been considered ‘unnatural,’ and, by virtue of close association of the natural with the morally acceptable, immoral” (p. 86). McCaughey presents a biased selection of literature to portray evolutionary science as deriving from a “heterocentrist”

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model that promotes social policies that benefit heterosexuals to the exclusion of non-heterosexuals. She uses derogatory language to depict evolutionary scientists as politically biased bigots. According to McCaughey, “Evolutionary stories naturalize heterosexuality not because the ‘facts’ of evolution simply force us to accept our soiled (heterosexual) animal natures, but because an unexamined commitment to the privileged, universal status of Western heterosexual masculinity has influenced the kind of evolutionary psychologies theorists have imagined and projected onto our past” (p. 106).

In chapter five, McCaughey questions the scientific utility of HBE theories. She argues that evolutionary theories are appealing stories with no truth value: “HBE’s explanatory power, then, has more to do with the way it meets personal needs and social expectations than with its scientific accuracy” (p. 112). McCaughey’s attempt to discredit the evolutionary sciences is little more than grade-school name-calling: “HBE theory is hardly an exact science” (p. 115). With this proclamation, she disrespects stunning empirical and theoretical progress in cognitive, biological, psychological, and evolutionary sciences. McCaughey further argues that “so far there is no proof of a gene for a desire for big breasts, or a gene for promiscuity” (p. 115). The latter statement reveals McCaughey’s misunderstanding of key scientific constructs. Evolutionary psychologists do not search for a specific gene responsible for each human motivation or desire. Instead, evolutionary psychologists study psychological mechanisms—information-processing devices evolved to solve specific adaptive problems our ancestors faced recurrently over human evolutionary history. Furthermore, McCaughey’s misinterpretations of evolutionary theories indicate that she is not familiar with experimental studies that investigate the structure and function of evolved psychological mechanisms. She dismisses dozens of experimental studies that investigate the implicit lower-level cognitive functioning of these mechanisms (e.g., Maner, Gailliot, and DeWall, 2007; Schützwohl, 2005).

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In the final chapter, McCaughey introduces *Homo textual*. According to McCaughey, men should *disidentify* from the caveman identity—as defined, promulgated, and maintained by evolutionary psychological science—and *morph* into a new universal manhood, which she terms *Homo textual*. McCaughey’s definition of *Homo textual* is ideological and not empirically founded: “Men must use their imagination—not the authority of science—to create a new masculinity...*Homo textual* understands his manhood not through the grand narrative of science, but as a product of texts—scientific, legal, and political” (p. 140). It is ironic that McCaughey criticizes evolutionary science for arrogantly constructing a hypothetical caveman identity, while she claims authority to present and promote *Homo textual* as a new universal male identity.

It appears that McCaughey’s main goal in this book is to discredit HBE theories and scientists. She argues that HBE scientists generate and find support for hypotheses based on political agendas and hence favor men’s “problematic” sexual psychology and behavior: “[Evolutionary theory] is a partial political discourse that authorizes certain prevalent masculine behaviors and a problematic acceptance of those behaviors” (p. 17). At every step along the way, however, McCaughey fails to present clear empirical evidence to support her attempted discrediting of HBE theories. Her derogative language, her biased selection of HBE literature, and her obvious antagonism to science, in general, and to evolutionary science, in particular, will misguide and misinform the naïve reader. *The*

Caveman Mystique is not without merit. It is a wonderful example of anti-scientific political and ideological rhetoric.

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