

Commentary

Evolutionary Psychology is Compatible with Equity Feminism, but Not with Gender Feminism: A Reply to Eagly and Wood (2011)

Barry X. Kuhle, Department of Psychology, University of Scranton, Scranton, PA, USA. Email: BarryKuhle@gmail.com.

Abstract: I comment on Eagly and Wood's biosocial constructionist evolutionary theory (2011; DOI: 10.1007/s11199-011-9949-9). Although this gender feminist theory allows for evolved physical differences between men and women and evolved psychological similarities for men and women, it fails to consider evolutionary accounts of psychological sex differences. I hypothesize that gender feminists' reluctance to acknowledge that evolution has left different fingerprints on men's and women's bodies *and* brains stems from two common misunderstandings of evolutionary psychology: the myth of immutability and the naturalistic fallacy. I conclude that although evolutionary psychology is eminently compatible with equity feminism, evolutionary psychology and feminist psychology will conflict as long as the latter adheres to gender feminism and its unwillingness to acknowledge the evidence for evolved psychological sex differences. Gender feminism's dualistic view of evolution hinders the search for and understanding of the proximate and ultimate causes of inequality. Feminist psychology needs to evolve by embracing equity feminism, which has no *a priori* stance on the origin or existence of differences between the sexes.

Keywords: Darwinian feminism, equity feminism, gender feminism, evolutionary psychology, biosocial constructionist evolutionary theory

Introduction

As a feminist and evolutionary psychologist, I read with great interest the recent special issue of *Sex Roles* dedicated to feminist appraisals of evolutionary psychology (Smith and Konik, 2011). I am encouraged by several authors' attempts to integrate evolutionary psychology and feminism (Hannagan, 2011; Vandermassen, 2011). However, I remain disappointed that Eagly and Wood's (2011) conceptualization of evolution continues to be convoluted and their view of feminism unnecessarily restrictive.

As an evolutionary psychologist, I believe that much light can be shed on psychology by considering how the information-processing mechanisms underlying our

thoughts, feelings, and behaviors affected our ancestors' abilities to survive and reproduce. As an equity feminist (Sommers, 1994), I believe that women should have the full civil and social equalities that are afforded men. Equity feminism has no *a priori* stance on the origin or existence of differences between the sexes; it is solely a sociopolitical desire for men's and women's legal and social equality. Defined in these ways, there is no rational reason why these belief systems should conflict.

Gender feminism is an alternative perspective on feminism and is the dominant feminist voice in academia (Sommers, 1994). Its proponents believe that psychological differences between the sexes have little or nothing to do with evolution, but instead are largely or solely socially constructed (Pinker, 2002; Sommers, 1994). Whereas equity feminism "makes no commitment regarding open empirical issues in psychology or biology... gender feminism is an empirical doctrine" committed to several unsubstantiated claims about human nature, especially that of the psychological blank slate where sex differences are concerned (Pinker, 2002, p. 341).

Gender feminism and its untenable conception of human nature is evident in Eagly and Wood's biosocial constructionist evolutionary theory (1999, 2011). Although this theory allows for evolved physical differences between men and women (Eagly and Wood, 2011) and evolved psychological similarities for men and women (e.g., language; Eagly and Wood, 1999), it fails to consider evolutionary accounts of psychological sex differences. By limiting the realms within which evolution has shaped humans, biosocial constructionist evolutionary theory invokes a variant of Cartesian dualism. Whereas Descartes (1641/1993) advocated a mind/body dualism in which the mind is a non-physical substance, biosocial constructionist evolutionary theory advocates a "mind-differences/everything-else" dualism (Friedman, Bleske, and Scheyd, 2000).

According to gender feminism and its unwarranted claims about human nature, psychological sex differences are uniquely immune to natural selection. This convoluted conceptualization of evolution misunderstands how adaptations are fashioned and function. An adaptation is an "inherited and reliably developing characteristic that came into existence as a feature of a species through natural selection because it helped to directly or indirectly facilitate reproduction during the period of its evolution" (Buss, Haselton, Shackelford, Bleske, and Wakefield, 1999, p. 535). In domains in which the sexes recurrently faced different adaptive problems, evolution is likely to have fashioned different adaptive solutions. These adaptations often involve the intertwining of physical and psychological traits.

An example of the complementary nature of physical and psychological adaptations can be seen in pregnancy sickness. Just as women, but not men, faced the adaptive problem of avoiding the ingestion of teratogens that could harm a developing fetus, women but not men evolved physiological adaptations (e.g., vomiting to expel teratogens) and psychological adaptations (e.g., food-specific disgust to avoid teratogens) to help solve the problem (Profet, 1988, 1992). Similarly, just as men, but not women, faced the adaptive problem of sperm competition, men but not women evolved physiological adaptations (e.g., variations in sperm production and insemination as a function of time spent apart from partner; Baker and Bellis, 1995) and psychological adaptations (e.g., variation in desire to copulate with partner as a function of time spent apart from partner; Shackelford, Goetz, McKibbin, and Starratt, 2007) to help solve the problem (Shackelford, Pound, and Goetz, 2005).

An important question for future research is why gender feminists unnecessarily wed themselves to a dualistic conceptualization of evolution and human nature that is theoretically untenable and empirically unsupported. I suspect that gender feminists' reluctance to acknowledge that evolution has left different fingerprints on men's and women's bodies *and* brains stems from two common misunderstandings of evolutionary psychology (Buss, 2012; Confer et al., 2010).

The first misunderstanding, the myth of immutability, is evidenced when one erroneously concludes that "if it's evolutionary, then we can't change it." As has been discussed at length elsewhere (Buss, 1996; Buss, 2012; Confer et al., 2010; Geher, 2006), evolutionary psychology does not view human behavior as impervious to change. In fact, evolutionary psychologists have cogently argued that knowledge of the informational inputs to evolved psychological mechanisms is a crucial first step toward changing the behavioral output of these mechanisms (Buss, 1996; Buss, 2012; Confer et al., 2010; DeKay and Buss, 1992; Geher, 2006).

The second pervasive misunderstanding is the naturalistic fallacy, which rears its illogical head when one concludes that "if it's evolutionary and hence natural, then it's okay and hence good." Numerous evolutionary psychologists have unpacked the mistaken inference that if something is the case then it ought to be the case (Buss, 2003; Geher, 2006; Pinker, 2002). Evolutionary psychology does not excuse, justify, or rationalize any human's thoughts, feelings, or actions (Buss, 1996; Geher, 2006). It merely seeks to discover and detail the design of the information-processing mechanisms that underlie our psychology.

If some women have been subjugated because they were regarded as different than (and inferior to) men and some men have excused their misogynistic behavior as being an inevitable consequence of their genes, then a reluctance to embrace a discipline which viewed such pernicious behavior as immutable and excusable would be understandable. But evolutionary psychology is not that discipline (Buss, 1996). Future research might explore whether those who fallaciously believe that evolutionary psychologists view nature as immutable and suitable for justifying the status quo are more likely to endorse gender feminism and its untenable conception of sex differences than to self-identify as equity feminists.

As illustrated by the pioneering work of Darwinian feminists Griet Vandermassen (2004, 2005, 2008, 2011) and Rebecca J. Hannagan (2008) and the emergence of the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society (www.maryannefisher.com/feps/), evolutionary psychology and equity feminism are eminently compatible. However, evolutionary psychology and feminist psychology will conflict as long as the latter adheres to gender feminism and its unwillingness to acknowledge the evidence (Buss, 2003; Geary, 2010; Mealey, 2000; Pinker, 2002) for evolved psychological sex differences. It is tragically ironic that feminist psychology—a discipline in part dedicated to shedding light on women's struggles with inequity—struggles to consider any and all insights into the origin of the inequities faced by women. Gender feminism's dualistic view of evolution hinders the search for and understanding of the proximate *and ultimate* causes of inequality. Feminist psychology needs to evolve. To paraphrase one of Darwin's closing sentiments in *On the Origin of Species* (1859): In the distant future I see open fields for far more important researches. Feminist psychology will be based on equity feminism, that of

the necessary civil and social liberties of both sexes, and not the untenable perspective that psychological sex differences did not evolve.

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