

Research Dialogue

Evolutionary psychology is not the only productive evolutionary approach to understanding consumer behavior

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Abstract

I respond to Vlas Griskevicius and Douglas T. Kendrick (G&K) and Gad Saad's (S) defenses of the view that Consumer Studies would benefit from the appeal to evolution in all work aimed at understanding consumer behavior. I argue that G&K and S's reliance on one theoretical perspective, that of evolutionary psychology, limits their options. Further, I point out some specific problems with the theoretical perspective of evolutionary psychology. Finally, I introduce some alternative evolutionary approaches to studying human behavior that could profitably be adopted in consumer research.

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Introduction

Human behavior is massively varied and complex. Charles Darwin was the first to appeal to evolution in an attempt to understand aspects of our behavior and many researchers now bring evolution to bear in this context. Evolutionary explanations of human behavior arise from a wide range of theoretical perspectives, for example, behavioral ecology, behavioral genetics, developmental psychobiology, ethology, evolutionary psychology, gene-culture co-evolution, niche construction, neuroendocrinology and sociobiology. There are quite distinct fault lines dividing some of these theoretical perspectives from one another (See e.g. Downes, 2001). There are debates between proponents of alternate evolutionary perspectives and these debates are often over how to understand key concepts within evolution such as adaptation. In my view, a more successful and productive pluralistic evolutionary approach to explaining human behavior will come after these debates have been resolved.

In their respective pieces, Vlas Griskevicius and Douglas T. Kendrick (2013; hereafter G&K) and Gad Saad (2013; hereafter, S) defend the view that consumer research would

benefit from the appeal to evolution in all work aimed at understanding consumer behavior. The evolutionary consumer research project is well underway, as citations in the G&K and S articles indicate. Saad's contribution to this developing sub-discipline already includes three books on evolution, consumption, and business (e.g., Saad, 2007).

It is important to note that both G&K and S approach the notion of evolutionary-based consumption from different perspectives *within* evolutionary psychology. Although somewhat different, both of their approaches owe most to the form of evolutionary psychology articulated and defended by Tooby and Cosmides (1992). Influenced by Tooby and Cosmides, G&K and S anticipate critics among their peers in the mold of social constructivists that Tooby, Cosmides and their colleagues focused their critical attacks on. This may be an appropriate stance in contemporary consumer research but further a field, debates about evolutionary psychology or the appeal to evolution in studying human behavior are much more wide ranging and have many dimensions. For example, many who bring evolution to bear on human behavior have culture at the forefront of their theoretical framework but it would be premature to dismiss their work on the grounds that they adhere to social constructivism (See e.g. Henrich, 2011).

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In this commentary, I first discuss G&K and S's commitment to variants of the theoretical framework of evolutionary psychology. Next, I examine one aspect of this framework, which I refer to as "modular nativism." After that, I go on to discuss recent work on waist–hip ratios to illustrate the impact that different evolutionary approaches can have on our understanding of human behavior. To conclude, I share G&K and S's enthusiasm for bringing evolution to bear on our understanding of human behavior. However, I also encourage them and others in consumer research to draw from other available evolutionary approaches to human behavior rather than drawing on a specific variant of evolutionary psychology.

The Cosmides and Tooby perspective

G&K and S both share a specific evolutionary perspective. Their approach has most in common with the evolutionary psychology articulated and defended by [Tooby and Cosmides \(1992, 2005\)](#). This approach to evolutionary psychology has a distinct set of theoretical commitments:

- i. The mind is a computer designed by natural selection to extract information from the environment.
- ii. Individual human behavior, generated by this evolved computer is a response to information extracted from the environment. Understanding behavior requires articulating the cognitive programs that generate the behavior.
- iii. The cognitive programs of the human brain are adaptations. These programs exist because they produced behavior in our ancestors that enhanced their survival and allowed them to reproduce.
- iv. The cognitive programs of the human brain were adapted in ancestral environments but may not be adaptive now.
- v. Natural selection results in brains composed of many different special purpose programs and no (or very few) domain general programs.
- vi. We gain a systematic understanding of cultural and social phenomena by appealing to the evolved computational architecture of our minds (c.f., [Downes, 2008](#)) (Derived from [Tooby & Cosmides, 2005](#), 16–18).

G&K and S share versions of all of these theoretical tenets. The "cognitive programs," they all focus most of their attention are "motivations." The relevant motivations are all special purpose and modular¹ and are all adaptations or products of natural selection. Proponents of this style of evolutionary psychology evoke many different evolved mechanisms including motivations, instincts, modules and Darwinian algorithms. The different terminology should not distract, the important point is the structure of the evolutionary explanations proposed within the framework. The idea is that a specific aspect of our behavior, say conspicuous consumption, is best accounted for in terms of an underlying mechanism that was produced by natural selection on our ancestors. The mechanisms produced by natural selection, or adaptations, provide what G&K and S, borrowing from

Cosmides, Tooby et al., refer to as "ultimate explanations" as opposed to "proximate explanations." All these authors take the main contribution of an evolutionary approach to be the addition of ultimate explanations for phenomena currently only accounted for in proximate terms by their colleagues in consumer research.

Proximate causes are more immediate causes of any given behavior, for example, the snake I see on the trail in front of me is one of the relevant proximate causes of my stepping back and picking a route that is beyond the range of the snake's strike. The underlying mechanism that produces my evasive behavior when confronting the snake can be the ultimate cause according to the perspective adopted by G&K and S. What they and others working in this framework argue is that answers to questions about ultimate causes are evolutionary answers.

[Sober and Wilson \(1998, p. 199\)](#) have a helpful way of putting this point: "when a behavior evolves, a proximate mechanism also must evolve that allows the organism to produce the target behavior." They add that "the behavior evolved in an ancestral lineage because it was favored by natural selection; within the lifetime of an organism, the behavior now occurs because there is an internal mechanism inside the organism that causes it" ([Sober & Wilson, 1998, 200](#)) (c.f. [Downes, 2005](#)). G&K and S, following other evolutionary psychologists, argue that discovering ultimate causes is crucial for any hypothesizing about proximate causes. So my snake avoidance would have an ultimate cause if the behavior is produced by a snake avoidance mechanism that I have as a result of that mechanism being an adaptation for my ancestors.

My view (See [Downes, 2005](#)) is that human behavior, and by implication consumer behavior, is best understood as being the result of a myriad of causal factors. For any given behavioral suite, say conspicuous consumption, there are many proximate causes and possibly several ultimate causes. Teasing out what all those proximate causes are and how they relate to one another in the production of the relevant behavior is a difficult task, which is not always made easier by proposing an ultimate cause for the relevant behavior. With an ultimate cause in hand we are still confronted with questions about the relations between all the various proximate causal mechanisms and the proposed ultimate causal mechanism. A further worry is that the candidate ultimate causes the evolved motivations, G&K and S all propose have different levels of empirical support. It is notoriously hard to provide empirical support for a specific underlying motivation being the product of natural selection at some time in human history. I agree that it is reasonable to assume that behavior relating to mate selection and protecting our young, for example, has a deep evolutionary history but exactly what that history is and whether it led to the production of specific mechanisms or modules that underlie contemporary consumer behavior are questions that are currently unanswered. This general point about the influence of evolution on us is not an adequate substitute for specific evolutionary hypotheses about the origin of specific underlying mechanisms.

A further issue arises when we focus in on the relevant motivations that G&K and S argue underlie consumer behavior. G&K and S all share the view that consumer behavior is best explained by appealing to underlying motivations. They share an

¹ Clark [Barrett \(2012\)](#) provides a nice overview of recent approaches to modules and modularity.

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