

Beyond bananas: The evolutionarily informed ape

Briana R. Tauber¹
Jeysa Williams¹
Jessica M.H. Fell¹

¹Department of Psychology, State University of New York at New Paltz

A review of: *Evolutionary Psychology 101*. By Glenn Geher (2014)

KEYWORDS

EvoS, Evolutionary Psychology, Psychological processes

Evolutionary Psychology (EP) has been a subject veiled in confusion and misconception. Regardless, contemporary research in this arena administers rich evidentiary support of the insights EP provides, specifically, within the role of sexual selection in shaping the human mind, as well as the implications of evolutionarily informed problem solving techniques in everyday life. Oftentimes, intellectuals blindly accept traditional views on controversial subjects, despite updated and convincing data to the contrary. This blind acceptance may take the form of rote regurgitation of outdated theories. In his recent book *Evolutionary Psychology 101*, Dr. Glenn Geher does exactly the opposite. He provides us with a refreshing, straightforward, and enticing account of all things Evolutionary Psychology. With playful chapter titles such as “Sex: The Excitable Ape” and “Pair-Bonding: The Somewhat-Monogamous Ape,” this user-friendly 213-page book clearly outlines the theories, findings, and applications that underscore a forward-thinking approach to the study of human behavior in an engaging manner with playful chapter titles.

Throughout the text, Geher cites dozens of studies, highlighting the ways in which EP has paved way towards greater understanding of what it means to be human. Within the book’s compelling prose, Geher implements a unique interdisciplinary approach, beyond that of others, successfully bridging the gap between the fields of Psychology and Evolutionary

EvoS Journal: The Journal of the Evolutionary Studies Consortium

ISSN: 1944-1932 - <http://evostudies.org/evos-journal/about-the-journal/>

2014, Volume 6(2), pp. 24-27.

- 24 -

Studies. Further, unlike many other informative EP books, Geher presents information related to how Evolutionary Psychology can be applied to everyday life, and tackles various controversies surrounding EP in general. He begins with a discussion about the Applied Evolutionary Psychology Society (AEPS) and illustrates their mission statement – “to promote the use of evolutionary theory in applied fields such as policy making, business, law, education, medicine, and mental health...and generating evolutionary informed (EI) and EI-applied solutions to our social and environmental problems” (p.145). Keeping this mission in mind, he then delves into a handful of areas in which EP has been applied, and effortlessly enriches the reader with specific examples of how evolutionary psychology holds practical solutions to life’s common problems.

Take, for example, his discussion regarding the implications of EP on physical and mental health. Geher alludes to pregnancy sickness in women. In the past, women who experienced pregnancy or morning sickness were treated with medications designed to relieve the symptoms. It was not until more recently however, that this phenomenon was studied through an evolutionary perspective. It has been documented that pregnancy sickness in humans is universal and is found across the globe. It tends to occur during the development of the fetus’s major organs. Finally, the sickness is often a response to foods that have low levels of toxins that may be benign to the mother, but may be harmful to a developing fetus. After looking at these factors underlying pregnancy sickness, it is clear being sick and throwing up foods that can be potentially harmful to a fetus may in fact be an adaptation; pregnancy sickness may in fact be a form of natural medicine! Geher then goes on to discuss evolutionary informed diet and exercise regimens, where similar approaches have been taken to understand natural ways to address health issues – focusing on our ancestral environment to better understand and help inform modern practices.

Geher continues with an engaging discussion about how EP has informed our understanding of mental health. When a student expresses passion in devoting his or her time and resources into majoring in, and fostering a subsequent career relative to psychology, they are, more often than not, assumed to be opting for therapeutic settings involving purely clinical backdrops. Often, classic scholarship in this area takes traditional Western approaches to mental health counselling. However, evolutionary-based explanations for behavioral disorders are also viable options. Many evolutionarily informed approaches are predicated upon evolutionary mismatch. Dr. Geher, as well as countless scientists, understands it to be the potential root of several health concerns. Issues such as Bipolar Disorder, categorized by the inability to regulate intense, bright periods of happiness with that of grave melancholy, can be interpreted by way of ancestral environmental conditions – especially in Northern latitudes! The importance of these applied human issues is not diminished by the study of evolutionary psychology by any means. Instead, EP is calmly relevant in understanding and addressing maladaptive traits in mental health. This is just one such discipline that Geher provides evolutionary relevant discussion on. Implications for EP

applied to the arts, politics, and the structure of cities are discussed throughout this section of the book.

Another important feature of this book is related to the theoretical controversies that appear throughout this subject matter. Evolutionary psychologists make claims about origins of psychological processes and aim to incorporate an integrative approach to the study of human behavior. However, not everyone likes this approach. The controversies covered within the text include evolved behavioral sex differences, religion, genetic determinism, bad science, and eugenics. Geher makes clear the importance of addressing both sides of these issues and goes so far as to contend its use as a great teaching tool. Encouraging individuals to go in with an open mind and a healthy dose of skepticism can force readers to think for themselves and deduce what they find compelling in the research. The varying perspectives within and surrounding the field of psychology can aid in the development of bridges between academic disciplines. Although Geher discusses each side of the relevant issue, he does not necessarily provide clear-cut solutions; the controversies remain. It is admirable however, that he does not degrade the opposing view, but merely acknowledges the differences and embraces them for the potential they have to improve the field of evolutionary psychology in the future.

Aspiring psychological scientists are often left with the task of deciphering commonalities between various stimuli in our surrounding environment. Geher commences the 101 series manuscript with a pseudo puzzle; readers are left to earnestly ask themselves what statistical predictors of filicide, aggressive penguin action, emotional detection of smiling, and the blissful flowing of maple leaves in spring all have in common with one another. The answer lies in an amalgamation of explanations involving warfare, child development, courtship, intrasexual competition, sex, pair-bonding, alloparenting, and altruism. Unafraid to address the alleged stigmas surrounding the field, Geher ends his book with great positivity, yet undeniable uncertainty of its future.

While Geher's book acts as a fantastic introduction to the world of EP, it is limited by the fact that it is simply an overview of the field, and does not delve into further detail about each specific topic presented. Geher provides only the overarching material related to EP. Readers interested in developing a deeper understanding in any particular theme will need to search for follow-up material. This downfall however, is related to the inherent nature of introductory books in general and cannot be attested as the fault of the writer.

Those who do not share Dr. Geher's impulse, we suppose, will do well to understand that this book both begins and ends with his noble goal of appealing to his target audience: collegiate students invested in reaping the benefits of higher education, and/or merely those seeking a highly accessible portrayal of evolutionary psychology. Dr. Geher, professor and chair of psychology, as well as Director of the Evolutionary Studies program, at the State University of New York at New Paltz has published more than 30 scholarly books, book chapters, and articles on evolutionary psychology.

In all, we highly recommend Dr. Glenn Geher's *Evolutionary Psychology 101* to anyone interested in a comprehensive overview of EP. In his concise review of the literature, it is easy to see how EP has impacted and shed light on such seemingly unrelated disciplines as religious studies, education, politics, health research, and more. Geher aims to make these connections apparent to readers of all backgrounds, and in our opinion, succeeds in doing so. *Evolutionary Psychology 101* provides a fantastic description of the basics of evolutionary psychology. Geher graces us with a fresh perspective on the ever-growing field and delivers a well-organized, accessible, all-encompassing script (with a dash of playfulness) which we believe is a must-read for newcomers and old-timers alike.

AUTHOR NOTE: Please direct correspondence to Briana Tauber, Department of Psychology, SUNY New Paltz, E-mail: n01731425@hawkmail.newpaltz.edu

REFERENCES:

Geher, G. (2014). *Evolutionary Psychology 101*. New York: Springer.