The Behaviour of People at Work

Understanding the human nature of people at work

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Your homework

1. What are the problems that you would like to solve at work?
2. Are there any aspects of human nature that you are more interested to learn about than others?
3. Which work-related skills would you like to acquire or improve through this course?

Course Outline

- **Module 1.** About people and about the workplace: the fundamentals
- **Module 2.** A trip to the biology and psychology department: evolutionary theory
- **Module 3.** Focus on the individual: the Central Six and the Big Five personality traits
- **Module 4.** A focus on the individual: sex differences
- **Module 5.** Emotions at work: the function of coordinating mechanisms

Fundamentals of evolutionary theory

Understanding one of the most important theories in the natural sciences

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Evolutionary theory

- The fundamental of evolutionary theory is that species are not static; they change and evolve over time.
- Every species we share the planet with today evolved from an earlier species. E.g. chimpanzees, bonobos, and human beings share a common ancestor around seven million years ago.
- One of Darwin's central observations was that many more organisms are born than could ever possibly survive to adulthood and reproduce, so the question is which organisms become links in the chain of life, and which become end points.

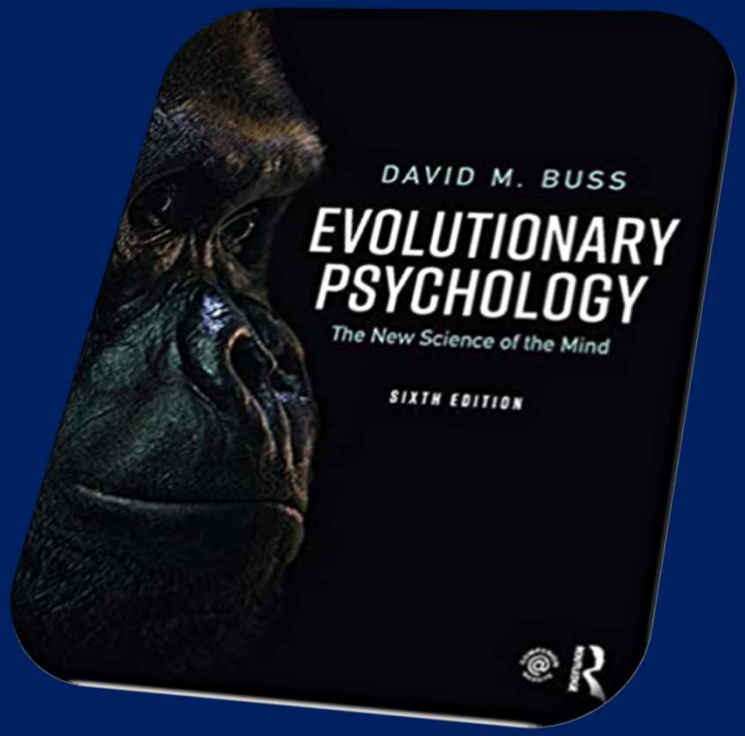
Natural selection

- It’s not just luck. Some organisms happen to have traits that boost their chances of surviving and reproducing.
- Nature functions as a giant animal breeder: it chooses which individuals get to reproduce and which don’t, and over long periods of time, adapts organisms to their environments. This process is what Darwin called natural selection.
- Together with by-products and random effects, adaptations are one type of evolutionary products; they are inherited and reliably developing features originating via natural selection; help solve problems or survival or reproduction, e.g. umbilical cord.
- Some uniquely human qualities, such as language are either seen as a by-product of a large brain, or as an adaptation.

Evolutionary psychology in a bite

In the evolutionary view, the brain is an organ that has been evolving through millions of years to solve problems related to surviving and reproduction, similar to other bodies' parts. Four assumptions are applied to evolutionary psychology:

1. Human mind organisation is fitted to Pleistocene hunter-gatherers, and not to the current world;
2. Psychological mechanisms that guide behavior are gradual adaptations, wrought by natural selection;
3. There are many adaptive problems that gave rise to different mental modules;
4. There is a universal human nature.

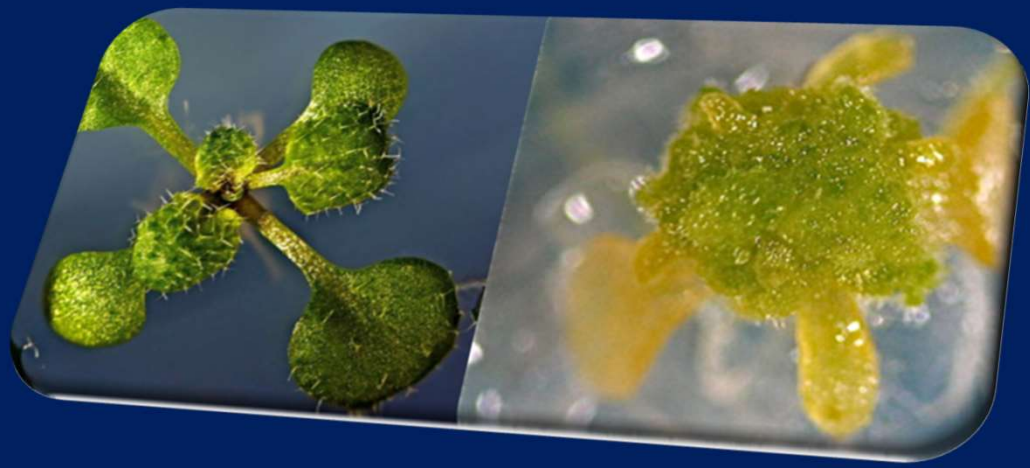


Celebrating the individual

- Instead of viewing one kind of life as normal and others as deviations, evolutionary psychology sees the inherent conflicts in relationships, the struggles that go on in groups, and the dilemmas every person faces to allocate efforts among a host of competing needs.
- In this view, far from providing a rigid and cold perspective, an evolutionary view fosters deeper empathy for the challenges we all face and deeper amazement that so many people are able to find loving relationships, meaningful work, and a way to juggle a bevy of responsibilities with good humor and even joy.

Misunderstanding 1: Human behaviour is genetically determined

- A lot of resistance to evolutionary theory comes from the misunderstanding that it implies genetic determinism (this is the idea that behaviour is controlled exclusively by genes, with little or no role for environmental influence).
- Contrary to this perception, evolutionary theory rests on an integrational approach, human behaviour as a result of two elements: 1. evolved adaptations, and 2. environmental input that triggers the activation of these adaptations.
- Consider calluses as an example. They cannot occur without the evolved callus-producing adaptation, and without the environmental influence of repeated friction to the skin.

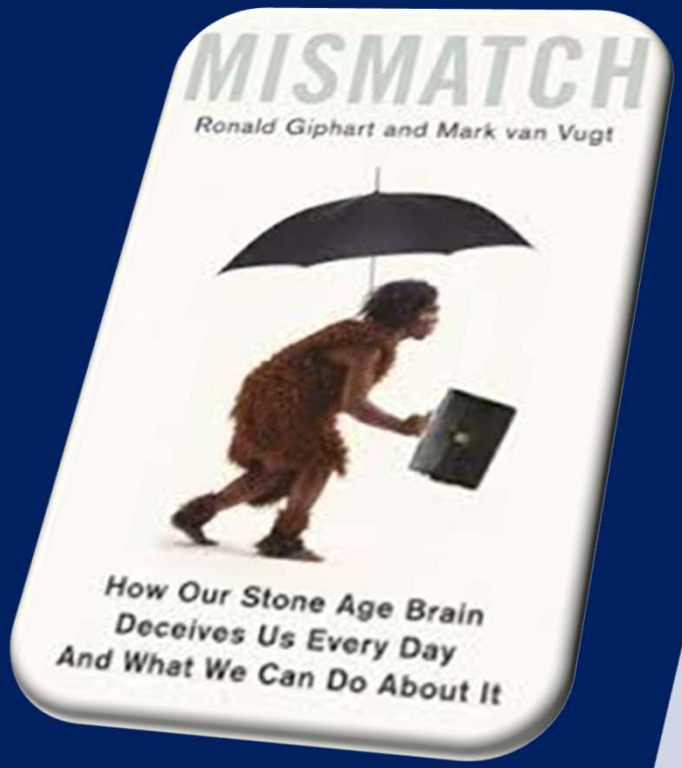


Misunderstanding 2:
If it's evolutionary, we cannot change it

- This is the misunderstanding that evolutionary theory implies that human behaviour is impervious to change.
- Consider calluses again. Humans can and do create a physical environment that is relatively free of friction.
- This means that we have designed change. A change that prevents the activation of the underlying callus-producing mechanism.
- Knowledge of these mechanisms and of what triggers it gives us the power to avoid it.

Misunderstanding 3: Current Mechanisms Are Optimally Designed

- “An engineer might cringe at some of the ways that our mechanisms are structured, which sometimes appear to be assembled with a piece here and a bit there.”
- One constraint on optimal design is evolutionary time lags. This is the idea that existing humans are designed for the previous environment of which they are a product, ‘we carry around a Stone Age brain in a modern environment’.
- A second constraint pertains to the costs of adaptations. We could, for example, reduce the risk of being killed in a car accident by imposing a 5 mph speed limit, but this solution is ridiculously costly.



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A functional analysis to understanding biological adaptations

One way of understanding adaptations is to do a functional analysis. We ask: “What is the purpose of this adaptation?” We can do this for anatomical features.

Q. What is the function of spikes and shells?

A. To help protect the organism from harm.

Q. What is the function of sex organs?

A. To enable reproduction.

The function of psychological faculties

We can also apply the functional analysis to psychological features:

Q. What is the function of hunger?
A. It motivates us to obtain the nutrients we need to build and run the body. It has the same function as the warning light that lights up when the fuel in a car is low.

Q. What is the function of disgust?
A. It motivates us to avoid infectious substances and toxins. Disgust is like the border control for the body, or the built-in poison detector.

The function of psychological faculties

Q. What is the function of fear?
A. It motivates us to escape or avoid danger and harm: to run away from the lion or steer clear of the edge of the cliff.

Q. What is the function of pain?
A. It motivates us to protect ourselves from tissue damage: to get the mousetrap off your finger, or to pull your fingers out of the fire, and to protect injury until it heals.

Q. What is the function of parental love?
A. It motivates us to look after our babies and children, so that one day, they can start the cycle again.

Evolutionary explanations

When we understand what the mind is designed to do – to pass on the genes giving rise to it – various aspects of mind and behaviour suddenly make sense.

We begin to see that there are evolutionary explanations for traits that were previously explained only in sociocultural terms.

The question is how can we make the distinction?

Universal traits

Consider the fact that parents can bribe their children with candy but not with broccoli. It surely is not a question of socialisation.

This is an uncontroversial example about human nature, but it serves to illustrate many points about other sensitive topics.

1. Firstly, children's sweet tooth survives despite parents' efforts.
2. Secondly, these phenomena transcend cultural boundaries.
3. Thirdly, many of the traits we are discussing are found in other animals.

Psychological equivalents of the peacocks' tail

Our next question is whether natural selection can build psychological equivalents of the peacock's tail, designed to attract sexual partners.

Evolutionary psychologist Geoffrey Miller thinks it can.

In his view, many of the traits that distinguish us from other species are not survival tools but mating ornaments.

The most common examples are art, music, and humour, but other traits, such as language, intelligence, and morality, are also multi-functional adaptations – they're partly survival tools but also part-mating display.

A game of great charm

Miller argues that sexual selection “transformed a small, efficient ape-style brain into a huge, energy hungry handicap spewing out luxury behaviours like conversation, music, and art.”

On why it was these traits (and not others) that have been selected, Miller’s hypothesis is that intelligence and humour (along with art and music and other cultural displays) are like Cuban cigars: they are hard-to-fake indicators of fitness.

Individuals who are up to these tasks must have especially good genes.

Evolutionary mismatch

Imagine you're a hedgehog. You're out foraging one night when you come to a road.

You start making your way across the road, when, all of a sudden, two white eyes appear on the horizon, burning bright as suns. The eyes belong to a noisy metal monster, and the monster is heading straight for you.

What should you do?

One thing you probably shouldn't do is stop and roll into a spiky ball. That might be a good idea if a predator were trying to poke you to figure out whether you'd make a good meal, but not so much when the metal monster is about to turn you into a pancake.

Sadly, though, that's not what you're going to do. You're going to roll into a ball and get squished.

Puzzling behaviour

- Biologically, we're the same animal that roamed the Pleistocene savannah: a pack-hunting African ape. Our surroundings have changed, but our core nature is the same. Culturally, we're unrecognisable.
- We're not adapted to this strange new world of straight lines, strict schedules, cars, designer wear, mirrors, cameras, and cities. This is why we're mismatched with our current environment. As S. Boyd Eaton put it, modern humans are "Stone Agers in the fast lane."
- Evolutionary mismatch explains some of our human behaviour that would seem puzzling, including our fears, addictions, as well as the fact that our diet is obesogenic, carcinogenic, diabetogenic, and cardiovascular-disease-ogenic.

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Thank you!

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