

**Letter**

**A FRAMEWORK FOR INTEGRATING EVOLUTIONARY  
AND FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES IN PSYCHOLOGICAL  
RESEARCH**

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**Abstract**

There is growing interest in a feminist perspective on evolutionary research, yet no clear consensus on exactly what this viewpoint entails. We present a framework with three core components for the purpose of generating a constructive dialogue regarding this approach: 1) Think critically about sex and gender, and do not adopt assumptions, regardless of the source, without supportive evidence; 2) Explicitly recognize females as active agents in evolutionary processes; 3) Explicitly recognize women as active agents in human dynamics, including those related to inter-sexual selection and intra-sexual competition. Adoption of these principles may help advance understanding across disciplines, though there may be some feminists and even some evolutionary researchers who will balk at some or all of these principles.

**Keywords:** Feminism, science, evolution, psychology, theory

**Introduction**

It is critical that we begin with an appropriate definition of feminism, as there is considerable variation in definitions and interpretations. We rely on the definition provided by Anne Campbell, in that feminism is a “social movement and political program aimed at ameliorating the position of women in society” (Campbell, 2006, p. 63). Campbell notes that this goal is one that a large number of evolutionary psychologists have in common, and that many scholars within the field of evolutionary psychology have written about feminist issues. Although we recognize progress in this area, there is no unified approach to merging feminism with evolutionary psychology. This letter represents our attempt to provide core concepts we believe will help advance this effort.

This is an exciting time for such an approach, given the considerable discussion in conference sessions, online forums, and reviews of scholarly books. A growing

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number of evolutionary scholars are proclaiming their interest in a feminist perspective. Indeed, the letters in this issue reflect this growing interest, as does the special issue of the academic journal *Sex Roles* devoted to the topic of feminism and evolutionary psychological views of mate selection (2011, volume 64).

Reactions have ranged from strong support to incredulity, and recent on-line discussions have generated more heat than light. One of the informal but common criticisms against those attempting to bridge feminist theory (or viewpoints) with evolutionary psychology is that science is supposed to be performed without bias; that entertaining a feminist perspective means placing an ideology upon hypothesis testing, for example. However, this criticism is not unique to the feminist evolutionary approach. The sciences seem to be plagued with biases with respect to the type of questions that are asked, methods that are employed, or the conclusions that are reached (for a review, see Tuana, 1989; see Fausto-Sterling, 1985, for specific comment about evolutionary psychology). Irigaray (1989) examines the language of science and argues that gender/sex influences the actual types of questions scientists ask, while Hubbard (1989) points out gender/sex's influence in laboratory structure, assumptions about human nature, and gender/sex bias in scientific language. Some, like Tuana (1989, p. xi), argue that science is a cultural construction, structured by political, social, and economic values within which it is practiced, and therefore, by default, contains a number of biases, including those of gender/sex. In addition, many feminists since the second wave deem the scientific method as a practice that is profoundly and historically unfeminist (Hyde, 1996).

In the interest of advancing the dialogue regarding a feminist perspective and research in evolutionary psychology, we present a framework with three core components. We hope this provides a basis for consensus on the minimal necessary criteria for what we call “a feminist evolutionary approach.” Other elements may be added in time, and there will likely be an extended process of defining additional parameters of this approach.

### **Thinking Critically about Sex and Gender**

First, one must think critically about sex and gender. Cultural practices and beliefs regarding gender roles vary widely, and yet there is a universal foundation due to our common evolutionary heritage. It is important for evolutionary researchers to educate other scholars and the public continually about the realities of contemporary evolutionary theory regarding psychology and behavior. Critics of the evolutionary approach often assume that it involves genetic determinism, excuses unsavory behaviors and eliminates personal accountability, or that it enforces the maintenance of the status quo, for example (e.g., for a review, see Gaulin & McBurney, 2003). The recognition that behavioral patterns emerge as a product of a complex interaction between genotypes shaped by evolution over many, many generations and the developmental environment of individuals has existed for at least half a century (e.g., Tinbergen, 1963). Human sexuality has a basis in sex differences shaped by millions of years of sexual selection, yet there is considerable psychological and behavioral variation within each sex and sometimes overlap in important characteristics. Rhonda Unger (1979) proposed that those working in psychology use the term “sex” to refer to the biological bases of an individual, and “gender” to refer to the socio-cultural influences. This distinction is similar to Tinbergen's (1963) ultimate and proximate levels of interpretation, such that both allow a

richer understanding of human behavior. Although distinguished by definition, sex and gender likely have a complex interrelationship.

### **Females as Active Agents**

The recognition of females as active agents in evolutionary processes may not be universal among evolutionary scholars. Some hold the position that because males have greater variation in reproductive success than females, they act as the primary (or sole) “genetic filter” where selection occurs (e.g., Moxon, 2012). Females are the physiological engines of reproduction, yet individual females are arbitrary to the process. In contrast, we recognize that females are also responsible for considerable variation in reproductive success, which of course is influenced by many factors in addition to the immediate production of offspring. For example, across many species the ability of females to obtain reliable paternal investment will affect the survival and future prospects of her offspring.

Fisher, Chang, and Garcia (2013) argue that “evolutionary behavioral research has been misled due to assumptions of women as docile in mating, and has too often neglected topics such as mothering, female alliances, female aggression, female physiology, female intrasexual competition, and women’s role in human evolution at large. When these topics are examined, they are often viewed in terms of how they affect women, rather than human evolution overall” (p. 2). Indeed, examining women as being active agents of human evolution is truly necessary, if one hopes to advance evolutionary informed research, but also if one hopes to incorporate a feminist perspective.

Lastly, perhaps most importantly for those working within the behavioral sciences, it is key to recognize that at the interpersonal level, women are active agents in human dynamics, including those related to inter-sexual selection and intra-sexual competition. Many misconceptions of evolutionary psychology (perhaps even expressed by those who advocate for the approach) appear to view women solely as a resource and passive recipients of male strategies (e.g., Milam, 2010 for a review). There is growing evidence that this is not the case. Women actively select male partners consistent with their reproductive interests, for example choosing men who are likely to provide substantial paternal investment for long-term relationships, but favoring cues of phenotypic quality for brief sexual relationships. Women can readily identify male mating strategies and make decisions based on this information (e.g., Kruger, Fisher, & Jobling, 2003; Kruger, 2006). Women also actively compete with each other for status and male partners, in ways that are both similar and different from male intra-sexual competition (see Fisher, 2013 for a review).

Women have provided the mainstay of calories for groups in that their gathering efforts typically provide a daily calorie offering, whereas men’s provisioning is more sporadic. Among foraging societies, steady calories are provided to the group from gathered goods, even when the most calories come from hunted sources of meat (Kaplan, Hill, Lancaster, & Hurtado, 2000). Rather than focusing solely on “man the hunter,” for example, one should also look at the influence of women’s active role in providing consistent nutrition to the group.

Adoption of these principles may help advance understanding across disciplines, though there may be feminists and evolutionary researchers who will balk at some, or all, of these principles. We do not deny that both feminism and evolutionary psychology have started in unique ways, as independent fields. For feminism, the first wave focused on women's suffrage in the belief that once women had the right to vote for political

candidates, inequality with men would disappear (Heywood, 2003). As we now know, this was not the case. Social constructionism became the analytical tool of choice for feminists during the second wave, not because it was a superior tool (it was untested) but because it represented the binary opposite of positivism and the scientific method – the quest for objective truth and facts, which were thought to be corrupted with androcentric bias. (Hyde, 1996). That male bias existed within the scientific method was arguably correct (see Vandermassen for review, 2004), and it is generally understood that objectivity is an approach to science: after all, if humans were 'naturally' objective and rational animals, there would be no need for a scientific method to erase subjective biases. Whether androcentric biases could be corrected with supposedly feminine biases that denied the existence of truth or facts was less clear, yet this appears to be the heuristic that led to the wholesale adoption of social constructionism by second wave feminist theory.

The binary heuristic reviewed above also appears to present a tidy solution for orthodox feminists (in theory at least) to socially constructed problems such as patriarchy; what is constructed can be dismantled. Following from this premise, it appears to make sense that “the prime strategy of feminists should be the deconstruction of the culture of patriarchy” (Barzilai, 2004, p. 878) and not the pursuit of egalitarian, liberal aims which second wave feminists felt had failed (Gamble, 2001).

We argue that the perspectives of feminism and evolutionary psychology may not be as irreconcilable as some would assume. We propose as well that the three core concepts we have outlined will help bridge the two perspectives. On the other hand, though, we admit that there will be a limit to the convergence in the perspectives of feminists and evolutionary scholars when feminists assume cultural determinism, reject the scientific method, and embrace relativism. As Fisher, Chang and Garcia (2013) review, two of the biggest obstacles to the integration of the two areas are the naturalistic fallacy of conflating an understanding of what “is” with what “ought” to be, and the politics of studying sex differences. Although outside the scope of this letter, scholars should be aware of these obstacles. It is a hopeful time for those attempting to advance both evolutionary research and the integration of evolutionary research with other areas of thought.

**Received September 1, 2013; Revision received December 5, 2013; Accepted December 8, 2013**

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