

Evolutionary Psychology

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Book Review

From the Gutter to the Stars: The Dynamical System of Evolutionary Forensic Psychology

A review of Douglas T. Kenrick, *Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life*. Basic Books: New York, NY, 2011, 238 pp., US\$26.99, ISBN # 978-0-465-02044-7 (hardcover).

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Evolutionary Social Psychology is a growing perspective within the area of social psychology. Indeed, Kenrick (Kenrick, Maner, and Li, 2005) supported this perspective in a recent chapter titled “Evolutionary Social Psychology.” It is important for researchers in experimental social psychology to acknowledge, become familiar with, and use the evolutionary framework to formulate research questions. Much of the research presented in Kenrick’s book, *Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life*, is mainstream experimental social psychology research by Kenrick and his colleagues. However, Kenrick’s narrative of the story of evolution’s transformation to mainstream acceptance, or at least mainstream acknowledgment within experimental social psychology, is worth reading.

Kenrick is a pioneer in drawing the link between cognitive psychology, evolutionary psychology, and social psychology. Mather (2007) drew heavily on Kenrick’s earlier ideas in developing the Integrated Social Paradigm (ISP). Kenrick’s career body of research has championed evolution in social psychology and has been highly influential to the most recent generation of researchers. *Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life* tells the tale of the advancement of this influential body of research, appropriately framed around the engaging anecdotes of the author. It is an excellent blend of theory, data, and humor, all serving to teach the content very well.

Kenrick argues that “the scientific lessons we have learned about the coherence of nature may have something very important to teach us about how to live a more meaningful life” (p. ix). Inherent to his discussion is not just reputable empirical evidence, but the application of this evidence within a unified narrative based on evolutionary psychology, which aims to improve individual lives through an understanding of our evolved psychology. Fundamental to Kenrick’s argument is the restructuring of Abraham Maslow’s pyramid.

Kenrick revised Abraham Maslow’s original hierarchy of needs, and asserted that self-actualization—the yearning to fulfill one’s unique calling—is not the most important level within

the hierarchy. Kenrick believes that Maslow did not understand the importance of human reproduction, and his pyramid reflects this ignorance. Therefore, in Kenrick's reconstruction of Maslow's hierarchy, self-actualization does not appear in the pyramid; Kenrick believes that what Maslow thought of as self-actualization could also be called esteem, which appears in Kenrick's pyramid, along with some of the original levels including physiological needs, self-protection, and affiliation.

If self-actualization is not the highest level of the hierarchy, what is? Kenrick replaced this self-centered stage with three other-centered stages, specifically, motives related to reproduction. These motives include mate acquisition, mate retention, and parenting. Without these drives, the human species would cease to exist, a fact that Kenrick uses to justify replacing self-actualization with these seemingly mundane tasks.

When Maslow initially constructed his hierarchy, he chose to stack the different motives on top of one another, thereby insinuating that motives could not coexist or that higher needs replaced lower ones. In Kenrick's conceptualization, the motives overlap while also depicting the higher needs as developing later. Thus, the hierarchy shows that the higher levels develop later in the lifespan but they do not replace lower motives such as physiological needs or affiliation. These lower needs are in actuality of utmost importance; without them, attaining higher needs will not occur. However, rather than staying at the forefront of our consciousness, the lower needs recede into the background until circumstances in the environment activate them. With these changes to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Kenrick focuses on the centrally important task of reproduction and care of future generations, and the necessity of maintaining the lower, routine motives.

Also important to his argument is that we have subselves. This idea is similar to that advanced by Robert Kurzban (Kurzban, 2010; Mather and Hurst, 2011). Kenrick hypothesizes that we have a different personality, or subself, that comes into play when we interact with different categories of people. For instance, we treat our families differently than we treat our enemies. Different situations also activate different subselves. Kenrick describes seven subselves that he believes govern our responses to various encounters or circumstances, thereby allowing us to react appropriately to other people.

The *team player* subself helps us get along with other people; human existence depends upon positive affiliations and identifying acquaintances that will aid us in developing these affiliations. The team player subself alerts us to whether our peers are accepting or rejecting us. The *go-getter* subself is attuned to social status and hierarchies within the peer environment; it balances the need to achieve a higher status against the demands placed on those individuals in positions of leadership. Self-protection issues and detecting dangerous situations fall under the domain of the *night watchman* subself. Related to the night watchman is the *compulsive* subself, for it is tasked with avoiding potentially harmful diseases.

The *swinging single* subself is responsible for acquiring mates. This subself manifests itself differently in males and females because different attributes constitute suitable mates for the different sexes. Once the swinging single acquires a suitable mate, it is the job of the *good*

spouse subself to retain that mate. Assessing the partner's happiness and looking out for people who could potentially make the partner happier are also duties of the good spouse. The final subself that Kenrick describes is the *parent*. It responds to information pertaining to the well-being of younger generation kin, not just biological children.

The ideas of rebuilding Maslow's pyramid and subselves are tied together with the empirical perspective of dynamical systems theory. Kenrick (2001) persuasively argued that dynamical systems should be used to integrate evolutionary psychology and cognitive psychology (Kenrick, 2001). Hurst and Mather (2010) have argued that dynamical systems inquiry provides the appropriate tool for examining complex systems in psychology, particularly in social cognition. Kenrick launches into a brief discussion of dynamical systems, highlighting three important ideas. These foundational ideas of dynamical systems thinking help to explain some of the selfish biases Kenrick discusses in the majority of the book.

The first important idea is *multidirectional causality*, suggesting that separating cause from effect in nature is difficult because the effect can alter the thing that caused it. Kenrick offers an example of multidirectional causality when he describes his attempts to persuade his five-year-old son, Liam, to hurry out the door by yelling at him. His yelling causes Liam to yell back, which makes Kenrick yell even louder; as a result, they run even later. Kenrick points out that all of our interactions show multidirectional causality; as we attempt to influence others, they attempt to influence us, thereby causing us to change our own influencing strategies.

The second important idea of dynamical systems is that they are *self-organizing*, preventing all of these multidirectional influences from resulting in mass chaos. Organization in nature often emerges from simple, self-centered interactions between organisms. What might appear to be random influences in nature eventually resolve themselves so that they are of little long-term significance.

The third and final important idea Kenrick discusses regarding dynamical systems is that complexity can result from the interactions of only a few variables. Geneticists discovered an excellent example of this idea: for the number of species found in nature, very few different genes comprise them. The interactions of these few genes result in the complex and varied organisms that we see in our world.

Kenrick presents a compelling case for evolutionary social psychology. Once this case is made, there are many applications of evolutionary social psychology to other realms of study. One such area of contribution is to the growing area of evolutionary forensic psychology (Duntley and Shackelford, 2008; Mather and Boggess, 2011). Evolutionary forensic psychology uses research and theory in evolutionary psychology to examine forensic issues, such as intimate partner violence, homicide, psychopathy, and victim adaptations—all issues that can be informed by basic evolutionary social psychology research, which has the potential to provide a very powerful new lens through which to view these forensic issues. Kenrick has not only demonstrated the importance of evolutionary social psychology to understanding such issues, but has also explained how a dynamical systems approach would benefit the study of evolutionary forensic psychology. Social behaviors are extraordinarily complex processes, and forensic

applications of such intricate systems of behavior are appropriately studied with deep roots in evolutionary theory and the tools of the dynamical systems approach.

Kenrick stated that evolutionary psychology traditionally has examined socially controversial topics such as sex, rape, and etc., and stayed in the “gutter,” but that the area of research is expanding to the “stars.” Evolutionary forensic psychology represents extending the issues from the gutter. However, the “stars” are also evident in Kenrick’s book. One theme of the book is an emphasis on family, reinforcing many of the best behavioral teachings of various religions as being rooted in evolved mechanisms. Helping people “to live more meaningful lives” is certainly a worthy pursuit for evolutionary psychologists reaching for the stars, though the gutter has proved to be foundational to reaching the stars. Kenrick does an excellent job of capturing the dynamical system of social behavior from an evolutionary perspective and distills the information into a useful form that is of interest to researchers, teachers, and non-academics in their pursuit of understanding human behavior.

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