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An Analysis of Human Social Structure in Relation to Evolutionary Psychology

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An Analysis of Human Social Structure in Relation to Evolutionary Psychology

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Evident in every human society is a discrepancy between the fundamental roles of males and females (Pinker, 2002). Collective establishments of human populations consistently associate certain gender roles to each biological sex which dictate their hierarchical positions in a society. In many societies, under the assumption of social structural theory, these established gender roles result in a sexual division of labor. Social structural theory recognizes this division to be a primary mechanism that promotes sex-differentiated behaviors. As a consequence of these socially constructed personifications, men are acclaimed with societal roles that yield them higher socioeconomic status. Women are thereupon classified to societal roles that encompass less socioeconomic power and recognized as confined to the domestic sphere of life. Men and women will accordingly adapt their specific skill sets to accommodate their social role requirements. These cumulative, continual actions will provoke males to display more dominant behavior, whereas women will display more subordinate behavior (Eagly & Wood, 1999).

In analysis of gender discrepancies in human societies Agustín Fuentes (2012) suggests, “there is a gender gap in economic and political power that constructs and helps maintain gender roles and inequality” (p. 183). He additionally argues that the elementary foundation concerning the institution of sex roles and gender-associated characteristics are formed by universal societal frameworks that maintain systematic characterizations of males and females in a society (Fuentes, 2012). These ideologies consequentially result in the contempt and subjection of the feminine figure and the transcendence of the male identity. Social structural theory posits many plausible explanations for human behavior. However, is it the primary mechanism behind gender associated differences?

Though it is undeniable that societal construction plays a significant role in establishing sex differences, social structural theory lacks a concrete and convincing explanation to why and how gender roles were initially established between men and women. In distinction to the study of social structural theory is the field of evolutionary psychology. Although considered to be a contradicting and competing area to social structural theory, evolutionary psychology may help to corroborate how and why disparate gender roles and distinctive sex differences exist amidst men and women.

In this essay, I will explore viable mechanisms set forth by individuals within the field of evolutionary psychology theorized to have established characteristic human sex-based behaviors. These mechanisms run under the principles of sexual selection, promoting the various sexual strategies that characterize distinct human behaviors which compose the principle apparatus that produces a social hierarchy. Social structural theory will be further criticized and addressed in relation to evolutionary psychology as a supporting theory to human social structure based on the influence and result of primary evolutionary mechanisms.

One of the most prevalent theories in the study of biology is natural selection which explains the phenotypical diversity between living organisms existing under specific environmental pressures. In addition to this concept set forth by Charles Darwin, he proposed an additional theory that encapsulated discrepancies between male and female organisms of the same species. Darwin hypothesized that unique characteristics definitive of a particular sex of the

same species are the result of a mechanism working alongside natural selection: sexual selection ("Sexual Selection", 2018). Within sexual selection, Darwin proposed two strategies that provide reproductive advantages to a species, intersexual selection and preferential mate choice. Intersexual selection describes intraspecific competition among members of the same sex in order to gain access to mating partners. Preferential mate choice describes the desire or inclination for a certain sex to mate with partners that display characteristics advantageous to the survival of their offspring. Robert Trivers added to Darwin's theory by accumulating evidence to support sexual selection, notably preferential mate choice. Trivers proposed that preferential mate choice is influenced by the minimum amount of time and energy each sex is required to invest in their offspring. The sex that invests more into their offspring will presumably be more discriminatory in selecting a mate than the sex that invests less. This concept is termed parental-investment theory (Buss, 1994).

When applied to human societal construction, parental-investment theory embodies the potential to explain why the primary roles of males and females are sex-specific. For primitive female hominins (specifically *Homo Sapiens*; modern humans), the minimum amount of investment necessary in producing offspring after internal fertilization required a gestation period up to nine months and additional post-partum nurturing by means of lactation. In contrast, a male hominin's minimum investment to produce viable offspring is solely access to a mating partner and the contribution of sperm. Based on the total amount of time and energy required in bearing and raising offspring, females are predicted to be more critical of the mate they choose based on the amount they invest (Buss, 1994). This theory emanates the sex roles of many -if not the majority- of human societies. Women are the primary caretakers of children, whereas males play a less significant role in their raising. It seems reasonable to assume this division is likely in part due to the amount of investment demanded by each individual. Though women by fault are biologically more invested in their offspring than males, this does not justify that women be confined to embody the identity of caretakers or men to be absent in the raising of their progeny.

According to David Buss (1994) there are three sexual strategies that dominate human mating. The first is that "human mating is inherently strategic" (p. 241). Contemporary sexual practices exist because they solved certain problems in evolutionary history which allowed *Homo sapiens* to thrive. Though the evolutionary purpose of these strategies may not be consciously sought, they are defining features of human sexual behavior. Second, Buss (1994) proposes that "mating strategies are context dependent" (p. 241). This means that people will behave differently whether the sexual encounter involves a short-term or long-term commitment. Lastly, Buss (1994) claims that throughout human history men and women have faced different mating problems and have independently evolved different mating strategies. One example of an evolved mating strategy includes concealed ovulation.

Concealed ovulation is a prevailing feature among *Homo sapiens* and some closely related anthropoid relatives. This biological feature has been theorized to promote sex-related behaviors such as monogamy, a theory developed by biologists Richard Alexander and Katharine Noonan of the University of Michigan. They hypothesized that concealed ovulation forces the male to stay "at home" with the female and their communal offspring. This is due to the idea that if the male is unaware or cannot indicate when the female is fertile, in order to further his generational line, he must stay with the female and copulate as many times as necessary to maximize the possibility of conception. Additionally, the male has less reason to copulate with other females as he cannot indicate if they are ovulating or not. In this scenario

both sexes benefit; the female gains by having a co-parent to aid in raising her offspring and the male gains confidence in knowing the legitimacy of his offspring's paternity (Diamond, 1997).

These basic biological features of human and human-related species may be the foundation to which prompted the development of distinct gender roles. While social theorists insist that gender-differentiated behavior resulted as a consequence of the sexual division of labor between sexes, some evolved behaviors are undeniably present in each sex (Eagly & Wood, 1999). An evolutionary psychologist would argue that sex roles were established prior to the notion of gender roles through the various biological differences and requirements of each sex. It is reasonable to assume that gender roles were established in human societies in part by evolutionary means as compared to a social theorist argument that gender roles were established separate from the influence of sex roles. In this analysis it is vital to distinguish the variation between sex roles and gender roles. Sex roles are biologically determined differences between males and females, such as a woman's position as the primary caretaker of her offspring due to the biological demands of mothering. Gender roles are culturally determined differences and duties between males and females, such as a woman's association with domestic responsibilities.

Though social structural theory aids in some explanation of sex-differentiated behavior, it is not sufficient enough to completely mask the evidence that evolutionary psychology has put forth in its studies. Social structural theory interprets sex differences as a consequence of individual, environmental, and cultural conditions (Eagly & Wood, 1999). Social structural theory gives a malleable explanation of human behavior, with its core belief affirming that humans change their behavior based on the circumstances or conditions they face in order to conform to a specific standard. This premise at its basis relies on a tabula rasa or "blank slate theory". This philosophy claims that people are born not having pre-programmed mental components that dictate behavior; thus, all knowledge is obtained through perception and experience (Pinker, 2002). Despite the theory's prominence and historical presence, it has very limited and compelling information that supports it. In an essay written by Robert Duschinsky, a social scientist at the University of Cambridge, he addresses the historical origins, modern implications, and receptiveness of a tabula rasa. In his argument, Duschinsky cites French sociologist Émile Durkheim who claims that human nature is shaped by the following:

Religion, political organization, the degree of development of science, the state of industry, etc. If they are considered apart from all these historic causes, they become incomprehensible. Thus, how can the individual pretend to reconstruct, through his own private reflection, what is not the work of individual thought? He is not confronted with a tabula rasa on which he can write what he wants, but with existing realities (Duschinsky, 2012, p. 522)

Durkheim argues that individuals tend to justify a tabula rasa because it is a manifestation of conceivable thought. To consider that one's self is not completely in control of their own free-will is beyond the consideration of an individual because the notion of not being completely in control of their thoughts, behaviors, and motives is psychologically inconceivable. This concept of unconscious behavior can be directly linked to evolutionary psychology. "Evolution is controversial because its very existence seems to attack our core beliefs about our own goodness, and the biggest questions regarding human purpose" (Crespi, 2015, p. 10). Social structural theory helps ease the thought of innate human tendencies, which aids in suppressing any suspicion of animalistic or biological impulses, completely separating humans as distinct from the biological world.

In reflection of the philosophies set forth in the analysis of human social structure, both evolutionary psychology and social structural theory have a place in this comprehensive examination. Evolutionary psychology establishes that sex-differentiated behavior, evident in all human societies, is the result of evolution. Social structural theory claims that these behaviors are rather the consequence of the institution of social hierarchy, that places men above women in a position of status and overall power. However, both theories when combined account for an improved and more encompassing model of sex-differentiated behavior. I hypothesize that it is evolution that initially established sex-differentiated roles due to the distinct demands of male and female hominins. These sex roles further differentiated into specific gender-associated behavior as establishments of human populations instituted concrete social frameworks.

To rely on social structural theory as an explicit definition of current and past gender-specific behavior and characteristics is restrictive. It is irrational to acknowledge humans as independent of the biological mechanisms intrinsic to all living things. Modern humans are descendants of primate ancestors; thus, it is illogical to assume that humans are an exception to the natural laws that dictate their animal relatives and every organism. Evolution and natural selection are ongoing natural processes that are present at the core of all living things, including humans. It is undoubtably certain that prevailing principles of evolutionary psychology have some effect on human behavior, and it is reasonable to assume that these mechanisms are in part responsible for innate differences between sexes. Additionally, due to the complex social nature of humans, it is also sensible to consider that some aspects of sex differences, such as the sexual division of labor, are amplified and molded by human societies. However, it is the essence of evolution that elicits basic sex differences and sex roles which dictate the ways in which societies construct gender roles and gender-specific behavior.

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