Evolutionary Psychology: How Culture Shapes Your Mind

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Evolutionary psychology incorporates insights derived from other disciplines about how cultural phenomena evolve over time. Theories that have applied evolutionary perspectives to cultural phenomena include memetics, cultural ecology, and dual inheritance theory (gene-culture co-evolution).

Memetics is a theory of mental content based on an analogy with evolution, originating from Richard Dawkins' 1976 book The Selfish Gene. It purports to be an approach to evolutionary models of cultural information transfer. A meme, analogous to a gene, is essentially a "unit of culture"--an idea, belief, pattern of behavior, etc. which is "hosted" in one or more individual minds, and which can reproduce itself from mind to mind. Thus what would otherwise be regarded as one individual influencing another to adopt a belief is seen memetically as a meme reproducing itself. As with genetics, particularly under Dawkins's interpretation, a meme's success may be due to its contribution to the effectiveness of its host. Memetics is notable for sidestepping the traditional concern with the truth of ideas and beliefs.

Susan Blackmore (2002) re-stated the definition of meme as: whatever is copied from one person to another person, whether habits, skills, songs, stories, or any other kind of information. Further she said that memes, like genes, are replicators in the sense as defined by Dawkins. That is, they are information that is copied. Memes are copied by imitation, teaching and other methods. The copies are not perfect: memes are copied with variation; moreover, they compete for space in our memories and for the chance to be copied again. Only some of the variants can survive. The combination of these three elements (copies; variation; competition for survival) forms precisely the condition for Darwinian evolution, and so memes (and hence human cultures) evolve. Large groups of memes that are copied and passed on together are called co-adapted meme complexes, or memeplexes. In her definition, the way that a meme replicates is through imitation.

Dual inheritance theory (DIT), also known as gene-culture coevolution, suggests that cultural information and genes co-evolve. Marcus Feldman and Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza (1976) published perhaps the first dynamic models of gene-culture coevolution. These models were to form the basis for subsequent work on DIT, heralded by the publication of three seminal books in 1980 and 1981. Charles Lumsden and E.O. Wilson's Genes, Mind and Culture (1981). also outlined a series of mathematical models of how genetic evolution might favor the selection of cultural traits and how cultural traits might, in turn, affect the speed of genetic evolution. Another 1981 book relevant to this topic was Cavalli-Sforza and Feldman's Cultural Transmission and Evolution: A Quantitative Approach. Borrowing heavily from population genetics and epidemiology, this book built a mathematical theory concerning the spread of cultural traits. It describes the evolutionary implications of vertical transmission, passing cultural traits from parents to offspring; oblique transmission, passing cultural traits from any member of an older generation to a younger generation; and horizontal transmission, passing traits between members of the same population.

Robert Boyd and Peter Richerson's (1985) Culture and the Evolutionary Process presents models of the evolution of social learning under different environmental conditions, the population effects of social learning, various forces of selection on cultural learning rules, different forms of biased transmission and their population-level effects, and conflicts between cultural and genetic evolution.

Along with game theory, Herbert Gintis suggested that Dual Inheritance Theory has potential for unifying the behavioral sciences, including economics, biology, anthropology, sociology, psychology and political science because it addresses both the genetic and cultural components of human inheritance. Laland and Brown hold a similar view.