

Evolutionary Methodology: How We Decode Human Nature

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One of the major goals of adaptationist research is to identify which organismic traits are likely to be adaptations, and which are byproducts or random variations. As noted earlier, adaptations are expected to show evidence of complexity, functionality, and species universality, while byproducts or random variation will not. In addition, adaptations are expected to manifest as proximate mechanisms that interact with the environment in either a generally obligate or facultative fashion (see above). Evolutionary psychologists are also interested in identifying these proximate mechanisms (sometimes termed "mental mechanisms" or "psychological adaptations") and what type of information they take as input, how they process that information, and their outputs.

Evolutionary psychologists use several methods and data sources to test their hypotheses, as well as various comparative methods to test for similarities and differences between: humans and other species, males and females, individuals within a species, and between the same individuals in different contexts. They also use more traditional experimental methods involving, for example, dependent and independent variables. Recently, methods and tools have been introduced based on fictional scenarios, mathematical models, and multi-agent computer simulations.

Evolutionary psychologists also use various sources of data for testing, including archeological records, data from hunter-gatherer societies, observational studies, self-reports, public records, and human products.

Major Areas of Research

Foundational areas of research in evolutionary psychology can be divided into broad categories of adaptive problems that arise from the theory of evolution itself: survival, mating, parenting, family and kinship, interactions with non-kin, and cultural evolution.