

DP IB Psychology: HL



Your notes

Evolutionary Explanations

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Evolutionary Explanations of Human behaviour

Evolutionary explanations for human behaviour

What is an evolutionary explanation for behaviour?

- **Evolutionary psychology** is part of the **biological** approach to explaining behaviour (based on **Darwin's** theory) which explains how and why behaviours e.g. aggression, memory, language, **partner preference** are the products of **natural selection**
- Natural selection is the process whereby behaviours and **traits** which are useful for **survival** and **reproduction** are retained – and those which are not eventually die out
- **Adaptive behaviours** are those which increase the chances of survival and reproductive success which is why they are passed down through the generations i.e. how we behave now is the product of **ultimate causes**

What is an evolutionary explanation for partner preference?

- Evolutionary psychology proposes that males look for female partners who are young and who look healthy (e.g. clear skin, glossy hair) and **fertile** (e.g. wide hips)
- Evolutionary psychology proposes that females look for male partners who have **resources** (e.g. a good job, money, stability) and who will be able to provide a secure home for the children that the couple produce
- The theory of **anisogamy** states that females are more **choosy** than males when it comes to selecting sexual partners
- Female choosiness is based on the idea that 'sperm is cheap; eggs are expensive' i.e. men produce billions of **spermatozoa** on a daily basis but a woman produces only one **egg** per month
- A man may have sex (and impregnate) many women without much consequence but if a woman has sex there is always the chance that she will become pregnant, ergo she must be choosy as to who she has sex with as a male without resources is not good material as the potential father of her children
- A **proximate cause** of behaviour might be seen in a person showing jealousy and wishing to keep their partner close but an evolutionary ultimate cause of behaviour would say that this jealousy is based on a primeval fear of losing either the opportunity to continue one's **genetic line** (males) or the protection afforded by a partner (females)



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A sexist stereotype? Evolutionary psychology says no...

What are the flaws in an evolutionary explanation of partner preference?

- While it is true that there are plenty of examples of rich old man/pretty young woman couples, this is a **reductionist** way of explaining partner preference – and it encourages **stereotyping** and **sexism** too
- Some women prefer younger men, some men prefer older women; plenty of women are able to provide resources for themselves and their family; some women are not remotely interested in money; some men do not wish to have children
- This theory makes no accommodation for **homosexuality**, as it is purely focused on **heterosexual** partnerships
- There is no way of gathering **empirical evidence** to support this theory as it based on **inferences** drawn from observing proximal behaviours based on ultimate causes

Which studies investigate evolutionary explanations of partner preference?

- **Buss (1989)** – a **cross-cultural large-scale survey** of attitudes towards partner preferences
- **Clarke & Hatfield (1989)** – a **field experiment** which investigated female choosiness in terms of partner selection

The studies by Buss (1989) and Clarke & Hatfield (1989) can be found in 'Two Key Studies of Evolutionary Explanations for Behaviour' on this site: just navigate the Genetics & Behaviour topic to find it



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Examiner Tips and Tricks

Evolutionary explanations for partner preference seem, frankly, outdated and ridiculously sexist to a modern, 21st-century person. If you find yourself feeling outraged, angry, furious etc. about the theory make sure that this doesn't come through on your exam response!

Have a good discussion in class about the theory but restrict your personal feelings to that discussion – your exam response should be considered, impartial and evidence-based. It is fine to poke huge holes in the theory but try to do so in a way which will increase your marks, not obliterate them!



Worked Example

ERQ (Extended Response Question) - 22 marks

'Discuss evolutionary explanations for behaviour'. [22]

The following paragraph shows you how to critique the theory without becoming overly emotional or judgemental:

Evolutionary psychology seems to suggest that we are mere products of evolution who are at the mercy of our genetically inherited drives that govern responses such as mating preferences. An evolutionary approach to explaining behaviour is reductionist as it excludes and ignores the sophisticated, complex ways in which human beings interact with the world and the ways in which cognition mediates biological imperatives. An evolutionary psychologist would explain male-female relationships as stemming from a desire for youth and fertility (men) or for a partner with resources (women). Such a binary approach to relationships does not explain why some men prefer older women or why some women do not want children or marriage. It also ignores the issue of homosexuality altogether which makes the theory untenable to modern thinking about relationships.



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Two Key Studies of Evolutionary Explanations for Behaviour: Buss et al. (1989) & Clarke & Miller (1989)

Key Study: Buss et al. (1989)

Aim: To investigate **evolutionary explanations** for **partner preferences** using a **cross-cultural large-scale survey**

Participants: A total of 10,047 participants from 33 countries and 5 islands aged from 19.96 years to 28.71 years (mean age = 23.05 years). A range of **sampling techniques** were used including:

- **systematic sampling** (e.g. in Venezuela every 5th household in one neighbourhood was sampled);
- **self-selecting sampling** (e.g. in West Germany participants were obtained via a newspaper advert);
- **opportunity sampling** (e.g. high school students who attended 3 schools in New Zealand)

Procedure: **Self-reports** were conducted either via a written **questionnaire** or having questions read aloud by a researcher (some rural populations were unable to read or write). The questions dealt with attitudes towards partner preference e.g. preferred age of partner, how important **chastity** or **fidelity** was; the importance of marriage and children.

The participants were also asked to **rank** a list of **characteristics** that they would look for in a partner.

Results:

- 97% of the females in the sample valued 'good financial prospects' which (apart from Spain) was higher than the males in the sample
- 92% of the females valued 'ambition and industriousness' more than men (but not in Spain, Columbia or the Zulu sample)
- Males across all of the sample stated a preference for a younger partner with an average preferred age difference of 2.66 years; females showed a preference for an older partner and to be married at a younger age than males preferred (25.39 years as opposed to 27.49 years)
- Males across the sample rated 'good looks' higher than females did and 62% of males rated chastity as a desirable quality in a partner (this was particularly true in China, Iran and India)
- The majority of Western, **individualistic** samples thought that chastity was 'irrelevant'

Conclusion: Females value financial security and an older partner more than males do; males value physical appearance and youth more than females do; both males and females appear to value partners who will give them a **selective advantage** in terms of reproduction; there are distinct cultural differences in partner preference

Evaluation of Buss (1989)



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Strengths

- The use of a large sample representing so many countries and **cultures** guarantees good **external validity** which means that the results can be easily **generalised**
- The questionnaires for each country were translated using three translators (to translate from English; to translate to English; to resolve discrepancies and ensure all terms were **gender neutral**) which increases **reliability** as it ensures **consistency** across the measure

Weaknesses

- The limited age range of the sample does not **represent** the views and attitudes of older people so it is only partially insightful
- Some of the responses may have been due to **social desirability bias**, particularly in **cultures** where men must appear to be 'macho' i.e. the responses may not actually match the true feelings of all of the participants, which decreases the **validity** of the findings

Key terms:

- **Evolutionary**
- **Partner preference**
- **Selective advantage**

Key Study: Clarke & Hatfield (1989)

Aim: To investigate the difference in **choosiness** between males and females when sex is offered by a stranger

Participants: An **opportunity sample** of 48 females and 48 males from Florida University. The study was conducted in 1978 and again in 1982 using the same number and gender balance of participants

Procedure: The researchers recruited 5 female and 4 male **confederate** who were similar in age to the participants (around 22 years old) and who were deemed to be attractive. Each confederate was placed at one of 5 predetermined locations around the university campus. Their instructions were to select a student of the opposite sex (whom they found genuinely attractive and at random ask them one of the following questions:

- "I've watched you around campus, I find you very attractive" followed by either:
 - "Would you go out with me tonight?" or
 - "Would you come over to my apartment tonight?" or
 - "Would you go to bed with me tonight?"

Results:



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- The first request (“would you go out with me tonight?”) resulted in around 50% ‘yes’ responses from both males and females
- The second request (“would you come over to my apartment”) resulted in a ‘yes’ response from 69% of the males but only 0–6% of the females across both studies
- The third request (“would you go to bed with me”) resulted in a ‘yes’ response from 72% of the males across both studies but 0% of the females across both studies responded with a ‘yes’
- Some of the females who were asked this third question responded with comments such as ‘What is wrong with you?’, ‘Leave me alone!’

Conclusion: There does appear to be a difference in choosiness when it comes to being propositioned sexually, with females demonstrating much more caution than males

Evaluation of Clarke & Hatfield (1989)

Strengths

- The use of a **field experiment** using **naive participants** increases the **ecological validity** of the study
- The agreement in the responses of both male and female participants across both increases the study’s reliability as it shows consistency over time

Weaknesses

- The complete absence of female ‘yes’ responses to having sex with a stranger may have more to do with women being **conditioned** to fear predatory males than from an **evolutionary mechanism** which favours choosiness
- There are some **ethical** issues with this study: the confederates were able to act on any ‘yes’ responses they received which could have put some of them in a difficult position plus they may have embarrassed some of the participants with their request for sex

Key terms:

- **Choosiness**
- **Confederates**
- **Naïve participants**