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Focus Article

LETTER OF PURPOSE OF THE FEMINIST EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY SOCIETY

Rosemarie Sokol-Chang
Department of Psychology, SUNY New Paltz

Maryanne L. Fisher
Departments of Psychology, and Women and Gender Studies Program, St. Mary's University

And 15 members of the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society

Abstract
It has been almost five years since the formation of the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society (FEPS), which was created with the hopes of drawing attention to issues that influence women's role in evolution. In those years, FEPS has changed into a more structured society with clear aims. In this letter, we review the rationale for creating FEPS, as well as how we structured FEPS to be an effective organization. The majority of the letter pertains to four distinct goals of FEPS that we will continue to address in the future. These goals are to investigate the active role of women in human evolution, re-examine previous findings, highlight understudied topics, and call attention to diverse populations.

Keywords: Feminism, evolutionary psychology, FEPS, Darwinian Feminism

Introduction

Almost five years ago, the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society (FEPS) was formed in response to a growing discontent with the way that issues involving women were addressed by the evolutionary-informed community. During one evolutionary psychology meeting (that of the 2009 NorthEastern Evolutionary Psychology Society), the FEPS co-founders realized that there were very few presentations about mothering, the active role of females in mate choice, and women's contributions to the human ancestral diet, for example. As is true for many evolutionary-themed conferences, much of the research presented about women at NEEPS reflected a greater societal focus on women's mate attractiveness and value. In retrospect, we were naïve in that this discontent was not new, as many scholars had commented previously upon these issues (e.g., Buss & Malamuth, 1996; Gowaty, 1997; Hager, 1997; Hrdy,

AUTHOR NOTE: A complete list of co-authors is included at the end of this letter, listed alphabetically. Please direct correspondence to Rosemarie Sokol-Chang, Department of Psychology, SUNY New Paltz, 1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, NY, 12561. rischang@gmail.com

1981; Vandermassen, 2005; and since, a special issue of *Sex Roles*, Smith & Konick, 2011). What was disconcerting, however, was the fact that we had arrived not far from the same spot, meaning that not all that much had changed. The current landscape of evolutionary psychology at first blush seems not too far from E.O. Wilson's 1975 prediction, that "In hunter-gatherer societies, men hunt and women stay at home….[this] appears to have a genetic origin….Even with identical education and equal access to all professions, men are likely to continue to play a disproportionate role in political life, business and science" (p. 50) – a belief that undermines the multiple roles women (and men) have played in human evolution.

We formed the society without a clear direction. The initial goal of the co-founders (Fisher, Sokol-Chang, and Strout) was to focus on the active ways that women have shaped human evolution. This goal remains a focus of the society and culminated in an edited volume (*Evolution's Empress: Darwinian Perspectives on the Nature of Women*), many chapters of which were authored by FEPS members. Our immediate goal as a society was to initiate discourse; from this starting point we collectively set goals to examine understudied topics, and potentially return to some of the "solid" findings of the field and re-examine them with new data. Nearly five years later, we look back and see that the tradition of FEPS has always been to promote discussion and reflection of previous findings in evolutionary psychology to inspire future research and interpretation of human evolution. As time and research progresses, we are starting to see opportunities to create a second edited volume, and are contemplating the creation of a scientific journal. Although it has *only* been five years, we have made great strides.

Structuring an Effective Society

We believe that our success stems from two sources. First, our society membership is free and informal. We have maintained a grassroots-style organization, which had recently been shown to be successful at promoting change towards creating a more gender equitable country (i.e., Japan; Takao, 2007). FEPS has an open membership that is automatically given if an individual attends the annual one-day meeting, or simply if someone expresses an interest in wanting to join us. There is a very small fee for attending that covers the low administration costs for hosting the meeting. The benefit of this approach is that we have a substantial student base, who bring their new ideas and energies to the group, as well as scholars who might not typically attend an evolutionary meeting (possibly because of the lack of focus on women or the historic way that women have been addressed in research topics). There is no hierarchy (although admittedly, Sokol-Chang and Fisher plan and organize the group and consider themselves the "co-chairs"), and until this year, there was no formal board or positions. We felt a need to improve our organization, so we have created positions such as membership officer, media relations, and so on, where people are not elected but instead volunteer for the position that interests them. Some positions are shared in order to encourage diverse views or to share experiences. The communal nature has been systemic in our society; the name, goals, mission statement, and practices of the meeting have been (or are) decided as a group, with open discussions. The meeting has consisted of everyone reading an established selection of articles and then talking about them, and evolved into a packed session with significant brainstorming for research projects. Although perhaps unconventional (and maybe even considered unacceptable) for some organizations, many of these practices are on par with those successfully implemented by other feminist

organizations (see Yancey Martin, 1990). Some of these practices work better than others, and there have been a small number of members who have left the society as it was not "hard-hitting" enough or was too "small in scope." Some members want to expand the society to make it an international, large group with a formal annual, multi-day meeting. In a few instances, individuals from other scholarly societies have approached us and asked if they could form a "sister society" in their region or for their field.

The second reason for our success, we believe, is due to our goals. Since FEPS formed, our goals have been refined and broadened. In the remainder of this letter, we present the four main goals of the society.

Goals of the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society

Goal 1: Investigate the Active Role of Women in Human Evolution

The first goal of FEPS is to focus on the active role of women in human evolution (for a review and expansion of this idea, see Fisher, Garcia, & Sokol-Chang, 2013). The role of women cannot exist without the role of men, as humans are quite likely the most social of all species. Thus, the aim of FEPS is to view the intersections of the roles of women, men, and children to establish a richer view of human evolution.

Much evolutionary psychological research has focused on the active role of men in human evolution. Take for example the Man the Hunter hypothesis, which positioned many of humanity's intellectual achievements, including language and complex cooperation, upon the selective pressure enacted on men to hunt large game (Lee & Devore, 1968). This hypothesis was rejoined by the Woman the Gatherer hypothesis (Tanner & Zihlman, 1976), positing that much of what we consider fundamental to human nature could be explained better by the nutrients gathered and prepared mostly by women, but also by men.

Since the inclusion of feminist thought within evolutionary studies, human origins have been explained by numerous hypotheses, some of which are quite inclusive of women. For example, Sarah Hrdy proposes that human cooperation can be explained by the species' tendency towards cooperative breeding and enlisting help in childcare; something extremely rare in primate species, but evidence shows is quite common in humans (Hrdy, 2009). Potential traits that follow from cooperative childcare include intention reading and Theory of Mind.

Though not outwardly feminist, Wrangham focuses on the control of fire and evolution of cooking food in human evolution (Wrangham, 2009). With this hypothesis, he considers the diversity of nutrients humans consume, and our relative inability to digest those nutrients without the aid of cooking to break down some of the complex properties of the food we eat. With the increased nutrition of our cooked food, humans are afforded more leisure time and larger brains. In addition, Coe and Palmer (2013) consider the social benefits of cooking as traditions and social information is communicated in the process of cooking and instruction.

Other approaches have examined the caloric contributions of men, women, and children across the lifespan (Kaplan, Hill, Lancaster, & Hurtado, 2000). Kaplan et al. (2000) found that among many foraging groups, more calories humans consume come from meat, but steady calories are contributed from gathered goods. Perhaps most

interesting is the finding that humans do not begin producing as many nutrients as they consume until about a decade into adulthood.

Each of these modern works, perhaps unintentionally, focuses on many aspects of a woman's life, rather than mating and child rearing alone. An increasing amount of attention is being paid to the role that cooperative child care plays in forming social groups, the caloric contributions of women, the role of food preparation in human evolution, women's competition for mates and the status of their offspring, and other daily aspects that presumably consumed women's time in human evolution, and presented selection pressures that ultimately altered the human mind.

Goal 2: Re-examining Previous Findings

The second goal identified by FEPS was to start re-examining previous findings about women (as well as men and children). A major tenet of feminism is the questioning of objectivity (e.g., Lloyd, 1995). Scientific theories exist in particular times and spaces, and therefore are subject to biases of the Zeitgeist. Thus, a feminist re-interpretation of previous findings in evolutionary psychology encourages scholars to identify their own biases when interpreting facts.

In evolutionary psychology, as in other fields of study, broad theories have been taken as de facto truths upon which much later research rests. One example is the Trivers-Willard hypothesis (Trivers & Willard, 1973), in which it was proposed that in prosperous conditions, parents favor sons over daughters, while in impoverished conditions, parents favor daughters over sons. While this hypothesis still appears in textbooks (e.g., Buss, 2012), one of the most notable empirical investigations of the hypotheses did not find support (Freese & Powell, 1999) but has remained relatively uncited by the evolutionary community (but see Keller, Nesse, & Hofferth, 2001). Interestingly, Freese and Powell wrote, "This article seeks not only to contribute to settling the empirical point at issue but also to encourage a renewed and empirically focused dialogue between sociologists and sociobiologists" (p. 1704). Sadly, that discussion has not taken place, to the best of our knowledge.

Another example involving a well-accepted and frequently cited model for much of evolutionary psychological research is that of parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972). According to this theory, "parental investment is any investment by the parent in an individual offspring that increases the offspring's chance of surviving (and hence reproductive success) at the cost of the parent's ability to invest in other offspring" (Trivers, 1972, p. 139). Trivers suggests that the parent who invests less in conceiving offspring should be more tempted to desert, having less investment to lose (for a criticism, see Dawkins & Carlisle, 1976). However, this theory has not been wholly accepted by the scientific community and indeed, the actual relationship between gamete investment (especially in cases of anisogamy) and subsequent parental care has not been fully established (e.g., Ellingsen & Robles, 2012). Further, its role in humans, notable for a quite unusual pattern of paternal investment (see Gray & Anderson, 2012) requires more investigation.

Thus, our second goal as a society is to consider which issues deserve further and new investigation, and determine whether or not the evidence supports these early theories and hypotheses.

Goal 3: Highlight Understudied Topics

A third goal of FEPS has been to discover and draw attention to understudied topics. One example of an understudied area is women's intrasexual competition for mates. Previously, researchers have focused on male-male competition, with the seemingly unwritten conclusion being that females accept the winner as the best option for a mate (see Milam, 2010 for a review of views on female passivity). This finding may be true of some animal species, but it does not match human behavior (see Fisher, 2013, for a review). Instead, as suggested by Hrdy (1981), women engage in many behaviors to compete with rivals, and the reason they had not been previously documented was because the strategies were subtle and/or often indirect (see also Small, 1993, for competition among female primates). Much progress has been made on the study of women's competition for mates, which is one of the main topics in the upcoming *Oxford Handbook on Women and Competition* (Fisher, in progress).

Two other understudied topics brought to light by a reflection on feminist principles relate to child rearing. The first regards female choice about whether and when to invest in offspring, or to abandon an offspring or commit infanticide (Hausfater & Hrdy, 1984). Until Sarah Hrdy's initial look into variation in mothering, primatologists had not noted maternal infanticide. Since this research, conditions likely to produce maternal infanticide have been fleshed out; notably a mother's inability to invest in an offspring, the ill-health of the offspring, or a tradeoff between investing in current and future offspring.

Another childrearing topic of more recent examination is the role of fathers in human evolution. The 2011 FEPS Award for a Faculty Presentation at NEEPS was awarded to John Hinshaw for his work titled "Fathers in Art History." Hinshaw (2011) examined representations of fathers in visual art, noting that Classical images of men holding babies are often troubled and dark; while the role of the nurturing father became more prevalent after the Renaissance. A look to modern hunter-gatherer societies reveals fathers who spend much more time with their offspring than fathers in post-industrial nations (see Gray & Anderson, 2012; Hewlett, 2000; and Hewlett & Macfarlan, 2010, for reviews). Just as representations of fatherhood shifted from the Classical to Renaissance periods, so have views of the evolved role of fathers shifted when looking beyond the modern Western context.

This third goal of FEPS, to focus on understudied topics, extends beyond topics pertaining solely to women, to topics that focus on understudied roles of men, and even changes and influences across the human lifespan.

Goal 4: Call Attention to Diverse Populations

The fourth goal of FEPS is to broaden the diversity of populations studied within evolutionary psychology. As with the field of psychology in general, much research continues to be based on relatively homogenous, Euro-American populations (see Hartmann, Kim, et al., 2013, a recent update of Hall & Maramba, 2001). Evolutionary psychology has perhaps fared better in its examination of diverse populations than many sub-fields of psychology, thanks to the plentiful addition of anthropologists performing fieldwork with populations in various societal settings. Yet, even within this sub-

discipline, there is an abundance of research on what has been called "WEIRD" (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, and Democratic) populations (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010).

Some evolutionists find little problem in relying on these WEIRD populations to extrapolate to the broader human species, because if the assumption is that our behavior is in large part reflective of our evolved psychological mechanisms, we all should share the same underlying structure (e.g., we have Stone Age Minds, see Cosmides & Tooby, 1997). Alternatively, Henrich, et al. (2010) presented a detailed argument outlining the rare spot occupied by these WEIRD populations in comparison to other groups of individuals for such previously assumed "universal" findings, from perceptions such as the Müller-Lyer illusion, to responses on the Dictator and Ultimatum Games frequently used in evolutionary economic studies. Some traits reviewed by Henrich et al. (2010) seem to be largely universal; the goal is to determine which are when looking beyond WEIRD populations.

Another example is bisexuality or non-heterosexual behavior. A case in point is female sexual fluidity, which until recently, was not examined by scholars, and in particular, evolutionary-focused researchers. Thought to be unique to women, sexual fluidity is context dependent sexual behavior, where a woman "experiences desires for either men or women under certain circumstances, regardless of their overall sexual orientation" (Diamond, 2008, p. 3). Recently, strides have been made to examine its link to allomothering among great apes and during human's evolutionary past (Radtke, 2010).

In many domains of psychology, feminism has directly or indirectly played a role in broadening the scope of populations studied when seeking to understand human behavior. For a discipline such as evolutionary psychology, that seeks to uncover the evolved mechanisms that solved specific adaptive problems in our past, we feel it is essential to likewise examine our findings across multiple populations before implying that traits are evolved and characteristic of humans in general.

Conclusions

In this brief letter, we have reviewed our intentions in forming the Feminist Evolutionary Psychology Society, and presented our current goals as a society. In 2009, when we formed the society, we had 29 members sign up within a two-hour window. Today our annual membership stands at approximately 30 regularly-engaged individuals, with hundreds of supporters from around the globe, spanning diverse scholarly communities such as psychology, biology, anthropology, mathematics and computing science, and literary studies, as well as applied scholars, such as psychological clinicians and writers. Interest in FEPS has been passionate, and we hope that by outlining the society's purpose and goals, we can help inspire current and future members to engage in discourse, outline new research questions, and inspire new areas of investigation.

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Author List: Marianne Brandon, Rebecca Burch, Rachael A. Carmen, Maryanne L. Fisher, Daniel J. Glass, Amanda E. Guitar, Glenn Geher, John Hinshaw, Rebecca L. Newmark, Sylis Claire Nicolas, Ashley N. Peterson, Sarah Radtke, Rosemarie Sokol-Chang, Briana R. Tauber, T. Joel Wade