Making Up for Lost Time: An Evolutionary and Developmental Perspective on Personality

A Review of

Pathways to Individuality: Evolution and Development of Personality Traits
by Arnold H. Buss
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Reviewed by
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Much of modern biology could not exist without evolutionary theory. De Waal (2002) recognized the important role that evolutionary theory has played in unifying the biological sciences and suggested that one day it may help bring the biological and social sciences closer together. To David M. Buss's (1991) credit, he recognized that evolutionary theory could help us understand the origin of individual differences in personality: “Because personality psychology is dedicated to studying human nature in all of its individually different manifestations, this field is uniquely positioned to contribute to, and become informed by, evolutionary psychology” (p. 460).

David M. Buss is an important figure in evolutionary psychology, but his words went largely unheeded by personality psychologists for two decades. As mentioned elsewhere (Bernard, in press), I found but a single brief reference to evolutionary theory in the 37 chapters of The Handbook of Research Methods in Personality Psychology (Robins, Fraley, & Krueger, 2007). This book is referred to by its editors as “a guide . . . that describes . . . all [emphasis added] of the resources in the methodological toolkit of the personality psychologist” (p. ix).

This year, David M. Buss and Patricia Hawley (2011) took matters into their own hands with their excellent edited volume, The Evolution of Personality and Individual Differences. And now, Arnold H. Buss has provided us with a new book, Pathways to Individuality: Evolution and Development of Personality Traits, that is the subject of the present review. In contrast with D. M. Buss and Hawley’s book, this one is written with a single voice, and one that speaks from the mainstream of personality psychology.

This new book immediately brought to my mind an earlier work, Individual Differences: Traits & Factors (A. R. Buss & Poley, 1976). Coincidentally, it was written by another Buss—Allan R. Buss. I read A. R. Buss and Poley (1976) as a graduate student, and that book was influential in my own development. For its time, it provided a solid treatment of behavioral genetics and the issues involved in determining the hereditary basis of individual differences. However, evolutionary psychology had not yet emerged as an important paradigm for the field. So it is a personal pleasure to have Arnold Buss, another of the most active thinkers and researchers in the psychology of individual differences, provide an overview of personality traits that is grounded in both evolution and development.

Because my own research on individual differences dimensions in motivation is based on evolutionary theory,
wondered what could A. H. Buss’s present book offer myself and others? Part I of this book provides personality psychologists with an introduction to the author’s perspectives on the role of evolution and development of temperaments and traits. As A. H. Buss notes, his own approach to evolution differs from that of evolutionary psychologists (such as David Buss), who focus more on processes of selection (natural, sexual, balancing, etc.) and trade-offs (relative advantages and disadvantages of different phenotypes in different environments) in the development of traits.

Instead, A. H. Buss brings to bear three evolutionary perspectives: (a) dispositions that humans share with other animals, (b) unique features of humans such as advanced cognitive abilities and culture, and (c) evolutionary trends specific to human ancestral species such as a lengthy childhood. This is a more molar view than are the detailed observations that are typically used to support the development of an adaptation in evolutionary biology and psychology.

One clarification may be helpful to readers. A. H. Buss’s use of the term development is more closely related to the concept of stages of development as used in developmental psychology research than to the processes involved in the development of adaptations as used in evolutionary psychology. That said, in addition to his “evolutionary perspectives,” A. H. Buss provides a useful cross-sectional review of personality traits in terms of their developmental stages. One example of this is the discussion of how the dimension of shyness is manifest in infancy, preschool, elementary school, and adolescence.

But this book is not just for personality psychologists. Those who work in other fields of psychology, such as social or developmental, and wish to catch up with what has been going on in personality psychology should appreciate the comprehensive taxonomy of traits as presented here.

Clinical psychologists should find particularly relevant the discussion in Chapter 8 of the notion of a continuum of trait normality to abnormality that uses several models of personality (e.g., McCrae & Costa, 1985, 1987; Tellegen, 1985; Wiggins, 1979). A. H. Buss raises some important issues about diagnosis and the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM). These issues are not the main purview of this book and therefore are not accorded enough space to be discussed in detail, yet even this brief discussion has heuristic value for those interested in the area.

It is intriguing that A. H. Buss sees no role for personality traits in the DSM’s personality disorders as currently constituted. However, he still manages to relate personality research to some of the disorders. One major criticism of the DSM has been its lack of utility with respect to understanding the etiology of disorders. The DSM very often provides only description as if it were explanation, which makes it vulnerable to circular reasoning when it comes to understanding etiology. Symptoms are the basis for making a diagnosis; some, perhaps more naïve, users of the DSM are then tempted to use the diagnosis as an explanation for the very same symptoms.

This is precisely where an evolutionary approach may be most helpful. It avoids this circular fallacy because it can offer a solid theoretical basis for understanding the origin of disorders, or ultimate cause, as evolutionary psychologists put it.

Occasionally, the book strays from a focus on evolution. In his treatment of self-consciousness, self-esteem, and identity, A. H. Buss provides a good review of the history, development, and assessment of these dimensions, but he is not as successful in discussing them from the perspective of evolutionary theory. This may derive from the author’s use of his own approach to evolution and his previously mentioned more molar perspective on evolution as it affects personality. Still, I think the evolutionary mechanisms of balancing selection (Penke, Denissen, & Miller, 2007) and fluctuating selection and trade-offs (Nettle, 2007), for example, could inform the discussion about these dimensions.
Overall, this well-organized book addresses the topics logically. A. H. Buss also does a good job handling the multitude of annoying, overlapping labels and trait names that proliferate in personality psychology. I believe this is a must read for graduate students in clinical, counseling, and personality psychology. I also plan to use it in a seminar for advanced undergraduate students. It is also instructive, from a history and systems standpoint, to compare A. H. Buss’s book with the earlier one by A. R. Buss and Poley (1976). In making up for lost time since David M. Buss originally called for it, Pathways to Individuality could help lead the way toward a renaissance in personality psychology by demonstrating the important role that evolution plays in the development of individual differences.

References


