

EDITORIAL

The Behavioral Immune System: Taking Stock and Charting New Directions

Research on the behavioral immune system—that is, psychological adaptations that are functionally specialized for neutralizing pathogens—has increased in volume and impact in recent years. Articles focusing on the behavioral immune system have appeared with notable frequency in many of the field's top journals, and the underlying theory has sparked research on topics ranging from food preferences to mate preferences, from ethnocentrism to cultural evolution. Over this time, the research itself has undergone a process of cultural evolution—as more individuals and labs examine the behavioral immune system, and the studies and papers accumulate into a sizable literature, the perspectives and approaches that guide this work have begun to diversify. This has in turn given rise to debates and disagreements regarding both theory and methods, discussions that are scattered about in the various articles and journals where this work has appeared.

After surveying this situation, we felt that it would be valuable to host a Forum where leaders in the study of the behavioral immune system could “take stock” of the current literature and highlight areas of ambiguity or disagreement. In our invitations to contributors, we provided rough guidelines to (a) assess and interpret existing behavioral immune system research, (b) clarify existing theory and terminology in the literature, or (c) propose new behavioral immune system hypotheses and investigations. To enable authors to express new ideas freely and accessibly, we also encouraged them to adopt a more conversational format, if they so desired. Apart from that, we largely gave contributors the freedom to write whatever they thought could most fruitfully lead to progress in this area. This led to a collection of essays, each of which not only addresses a particular question or issue, but also suggests some ways to move forward, or, following the second half of our title, “charting new directions.”

The final product is a Forum, a format that is somewhat unconventional in modern journals, but is central to *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*' mission to support debates concerning active research areas. Our hope is that this mode of communication can help work in the evolutionary community to continue to flourish. Following this introduction are the seven essays, which we found coalesced into three topically focused discussions and a single, summarial piece. Though the essays in each pair were written independently, readers will likely see them as talking to each other, combining to provide a fuller view on a particular question. These are as follows:

- *Circumscribing the behavioral immune system.* To open, [Gangestad and Grebe \(2014\)](#) and [Clark and Fessler \(2014\)](#) each discuss the distinctions between a “behavioral” immune system and what has been referred to as the “classical” or “biological immune system.” Both essays present challenges inherent to such dichotomy, with Gangestad and Griebel suggesting a new line of hypotheses regarding social behavior and antipathogen defenses, and Clark and Fessler calling for theoretical integration with the field of psychoneuroimmunology.

- *Affect and cognition.* [Lieberman and Patrick \(2014\)](#) and [Schaller \(2014\)](#) each discuss the manner in which the behavioral immune system should be carved in terms of traditional psychological categories of affect, cognition, and motivation. Lieberman and Patrick argue that distinctions between “affective” and “cognitive” processes obscure the computational architecture of pathogen-avoidance psychology. Schaller argues that some pathogen-avoidance behaviors that are not accompanied by a feeling of disgust might nevertheless be motivated by previously experienced disgust—indeed, that experiences of disgust might shape the types of pathogen-avoidance behaviors that might be lumped together as “cognitively” motivated.

- *Implications for societal dynamics.* Thornhill and Fincher (2014) and Hruschka and Hackman (2014) both explore how the behavioral immune system might shape the overarching structure of societies. Thornhill and Fincher argue that pathogens have played a prominent role stimulating and shaping human social evolution, thus having far-reaching consequences for the manner in which societies operate. Hruschka and Hackman comment on some of the evidence that has been used to test this general idea, laying out some suggestions and guidelines for testing the influence of the behavioral immune system on societal structures.

- *Methodology and theory.* Finally, Tybur, Frankenhuys, and Pollet (2014) offer a summary of the myriad methods that have been used to test behavioral immune system hypotheses, and they highlight theoretical and methodological questions that these methods pose.

Following these seven essays, the Forum closes with a final commentary that is akin to a moderator in a conference panel. This role is played by Neuberg (2014), who responds to the essays as a group, summarizes and highlights the most promising ideas therein, and offers his own thoughts on how they might fuel the future of behavioral immune system research. The Special Issue then concludes with two new empirical pieces on the behavioral immune system, by McCarthy and Skowronski (2014) and Ainsworth and Maner (2014).

As a whole, we find the essays to be wide-ranging and thought-provoking, and we believe that they will be of clear interest for researchers who have been following and contributing to the behavioral immune system literature. More broadly, we hope that the issues discussed in this Forum—ranging from the structural bases of individual-level adaptations to the emergence of societal patterns, to basic questions of methodological and theoretical practice—will be of general interest to researchers in the evolutionary behavioral sciences. We also think that the conversational tone of the essays make them as engaging as they are informative, and we hope that the reader enjoys them as much as we have.

Joshua M. Tybur

Guest Editor, *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*

Dan O'Brien

Editor, *Evolutionary Behavioral Sciences*

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