

1. The evolutionary psychology of human resource management

Human resource management, as both an academic field of study and a set of professional practices, stands on the precipice of obsolescence (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018). Although its “modern” origins can be traced back to the early 1980s (see Beer et al., 1984), the discipline today appears somewhat old and tired, at times lacking in both innovation and dynamism. Extant theories of human resource management are all-too-often self-evident, and the empirical work is mostly predictable and unsurprising. If we could distill the lion’s share of studies in HRM into one argument, it would be, quite simply, that employers should select, develop, train, and appraise the best people, treat them with respect and dignity, and pay them a fair wage, lest they respond with counter-productive work behaviors or organizational exit. Predictably, most studies in the field of HRM play on some variation of this argument, and so it is, therefore, hardly surprising that even the latest papers in the top human resources journals fail to elicit much excitement and debate. Indeed, an outsider to our field might reasonably conclude that we are nearing a saturation point.

Compare, for example, the state of HRM over the last 25 years to the concomitant developments in the cognitive neurosciences. Whilst for decades we have continued to argue, *ad nauseam*, that effectively implemented HR policies and practices are positively associated with both individual and organizational outcomes (see Arthur, 1994; Pfeffer, 1994; Huselid, 1995; MacDuffie, 1995; Becker and Gerhart, 1996; Ichniowski et al., 1997; Wood, 1999; Guthrie, 2001; Godard, 2004; Birdi et al., 2008; Guest, 2011, among others), cognitive neuroscientists and neuro-psychologists over this same time period have been busy making truly groundbreaking discoveries about how the brain works (for a good, accessible overview, see Presti, 2016). What’s more, in spite of these breakthroughs, behavioral brain scientists still, to this day, understand just a fraction of the inner workings of

its neural circuitry. Meanwhile, we HRM scholars often fall back on tautology to make the same, or very similar, arguments over and over again.

Fortunately, though, not all hope is lost for HRM. There are still frontiers to explore and unanswered questions, but in order to explore those frontiers and answer those questions, we must first learn to transcend our own disciplinary boundaries. To this end, Colarelli (2003) initiated what might be called a “biological turn” in management and organizations research, arguing that HRM should be aligned with evolutionary theory. A few years later, Wright and Diamond (2006) extended this biologization by pointing out that cardiovascular disease has important health implications, not only for employees, but also for organizations; White et al. (2006) showed that risk-taking behavior in organizations appears to be driven by high levels of testosterone; and Ilies et al. (2006) illustrated how a deeper understanding of behavioral genetics can throw useful light on management and employee behavior and decision-making. These studies were followed up a few years later by another key paper calling for an integration of human physiology with human behavior at work (Heaphy and Dutton, 2008). More recently, Becker and Cropanzano (2010) sought to explain organizational behavior from the point of view of the neurosciences. These initial exploratory linkages between neurobiology and human behavior at work were further strengthened by Lee et al. (2012) and, more recently, Nofal et al. (2018).

In short, there is an emerging wave of research suggesting that the future of HRM may well lie in a greater understanding of the natural sciences, with most of these scholars focusing on how biological and neuroscientific innovations can be fruitfully applied to the field of people management. This “biological turn” is a welcome development for our field, but it is, as yet, incomplete. One area that has not been thoroughly explored in much depth—that is, until this book—is the unique intersection between HRM and evolutionary psychology, also referred to as sociobiology (Wilson, 1975). There are two notable exceptions. Luxen and Van De Vijver (2006) explored the innovative link between facial attractiveness, sexual selection, and personnel selection using an evolutionary perspective, and Fruhen et al. (2015) found that the positive relationship between employee attractiveness and employee reward could be explained through the lenses of evolutionary psychology. The paucity of literature in this field, admittedly,

may well be traced back to the widely negative views that have been expressed over evolutionary psychology (Gould, 1978), especially in the context of organization studies (Sewell, 2004; Nicholson, 2005). To be sure, there is no point in attempting to conceal the fact that evolutionary psychology has its explanatory problems, but, then again, so does every other theory across both the natural and social sciences. Let us not throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater.

WHAT IS EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY?

Readers of this book are assumed to already possess some familiarity with human resource management (as both an academic field of study and a set of professional practices), but considerably less familiarity when it comes to the tenets of evolutionary psychology. So, let us start at the beginning. What do we mean by evolutionary psychology?

In order to understand what is meant by evolutionary psychology, we must first come to grips with the basic principles of evolutionary biology. The most pre-eminent evolutionary biologist of all time is, of course, Charles Darwin, the English naturalist whose fame derives largely from his scientific discoveries made during his *HMS Beagle* voyage to the Galápagos Islands, located off the coast of Ecuador in South America (for an excellent history of Darwin's journeys, see Browne, 1995). Darwin penned two of the most important scientific works of the last century and a half: *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin, [1859] 1998) and *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Darwin, [1871] 2001). A thorough explanation of Darwin's theory of evolution and natural selection is well beyond the scope of this book—and, in any event, an extended summary can already be found elsewhere (Dawkins, 2006). But a brief overview of the field is probably of some utility at the outset of this book.

The underlying assumption of evolutionary biology is that organisms, or even genes within organisms (Dawkins, 1976), are programmed to survive in a competitive and at times dangerous environment. The survival instinct is built into the DNA of all living organisms, resulting in phenotypical traits that enable them to “project” their existence into the future. Contrary to popular belief, it is not always strength that facilitates survival. Indeed, the term “survival of the fittest” was coined not by Darwin, but rather by

Spencer (1884), the father of so-called “social Darwinism.” Much more important than an organism’s strength is, according to Darwin, its capacity for adaptation (Gould, 2002; Williams, 2008). In other words, genetic variations that are associated with an improved ability to adapt to a changing environment result in natural selection, whereby the most adaptable organisms survive and thrive and the least adaptable ones succumb to the realities of a harsh environment, only to wither and die eventually. The classic ethological example of this selection process is evident in Darwin’s observations of the various finches found in the Galápagos islands. With an assiduous attention to detail, he noted that the same species of finch developed unique, idiosyncratic traits that appeared to be dependent upon the different sources of food across the various islands (see Grant and Grant, 2014).

Within this dynamic struggle to survive, the role of sexual selection and genetic heritability comes to be seen as the key driver of evolutionary processes. Obviously, all life is time-stamped with an inexorable expiration date; therefore, the only way to ensure long-term survival is through procreation and propagation. Within the animal kingdom, mate choice is the single most crucial mechanism for ensuring the survivability of an organism’s offspring (Andersson and Simmons, 2006). In its inherent quest to propagate, the organism, using exquisitely developed perceptual machinery, must be capable of differentiation between potential mates that offer the highest (and indeed the lowest) chances of passing on superior heritable traits. In this way, over several millennia, a species ever-so-gradually evolves, in large part in response to the outcome of sperm competition to fertilize the female egg (Smith, 1984; Simmons, 2005).

One might well be questioning at this point what, on earth, sperm competition in the animal kingdom has to do with human resource management decision-making. In order to explain this as yet abstract linkage, we must now transition away from evolutionary biology and towards evolutionary psychology, the organizing framework of this book. Whereas *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin, [1859] 1998) outlines a theory of evolution in the animal kingdom, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (Darwin, [1871] 2001), a lesser-known manuscript, was Darwin’s subsequent attempt to draw together reasoned inferences from his evolutionary theory of animal behavior in order to explain human behavior. *Homo sapiens* are, after all, just one of the thousands of other Mammalian species on earth.

Evolutionary psychology, previously referred to as sociobiology (Wilson, 1975), is a growing field of study that aims to explain contemporary human values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors as a function of our experiences in the ancestral environment. It brings together psychology, ethology, ecology, biology, physiology, endocrinology, and neuroscience into one, overarching explanatory framework. In short, it seeks to explain *why* human beings today think, feel, and behave in the way that they do. Perhaps the best way to describe its explanatory power is with a series of practical examples. Consider the following questions and answers.

Question: why do modern humans suffer from insomnia and related sleep disorders? Answer: the evolutionary psychologist would argue that light sleepers in the ancestral environment held an evolutionary advantage over deep sleepers, the latter of whom were unlikely to awaken when a saber-toothed tiger entered their cave at night looking for a tasty snack. Question: why do women express a preference for taller men over shorter ones? Answer: the evolutionary psychologist would argue that tall men are, *ceteris paribus*, stronger than shorter men, implying that the latter would be less capable of protecting offspring from an attack by that same saber-toothed tiger or any other animal or indeed person. Question: why do men express a general preference for slim, younger women? Answer: the evolutionary psychologist would argue that weight and age are concomitantly associated with infertility and ill health, thus rendering older and overweight women sub-optimal from the point of view of childbearing and fecundity. Question: why do people engage in conspicuous consumption (Veblen, 1925)? Answer: the evolutionary psychologist would argue that ostentatious displays of wealth signal to potential mates a high social status, thus increasing the chances of conception and thus reproduction. Question: why are men with bigger penises generally seen by women as more desirable sexual partners than those with smaller penises? Answer: the evolutionary psychologist would argue that penis “lengthiness” signals virility and offers a reproductive advantage in copulation. An astute observer will have noticed a pattern emerging across all of these questions. At the very heart of all human (and animal) behavior is an innate, naturally selected drive to increase the probability of survival and reproduction.

Even a phenomenon like racial and ethnic prejudice, traditionally viewed through the lenses of the social psychology of inter-group

relations (Tajfel, 1982; Abrams and Hogg, 1998), can be said, in the final analysis, to have evolutionary psychological bases. Whereas social psychologists can demonstrate that we have in-group preferences (Brewer, 1999) and mistrust of the out-group (Reik et al., 2006), they cannot readily explain *why* this is the case. Enter, evolutionary psychology. In the ancestral environment, individuals decided on whom to trust based on the extent to which the “other” resembled them. Kin were perceived to be most non-threatening and members of the same tribe or clan were seen as only moderately more threatening. However, foreigners, especially those of a different appearance or physical complexion, were viewed with immediate suspicion and mistrust. As a general rule, the greater the apparent genetic relatedness, the more apt we are to trust others (DeBruine, 2002), and vice versa. This “hard-wired” preference for the racial in-group may well explain the fact that a majority of people who claim to be racially egalitarian, in fact, still suffer from implicit or unconscious biases against members of racial groups other than their own (Greenwald et al., 1998), a theme that will be further explored in the final chapter of this book.

This point serves as an appropriate segue into a necessary discussion, or rather caveat, of what evolutionary psychology is *not*. Although an evolutionary psychological lens can *explain* human behavior, it does not, and should never be used to, *justify*, and especially *excuse*, the darker side of human behavior. This distinction is more than just splitting hairs. That human beings may well be predisposed toward prejudice does not imply concomitantly that prejudice is naturally inevitable and therefore defensible. As we will learn in the next chapter, we all possess both a biological self as well as a socialized self. At the intersection of these selves is the perennial and still vaguely understood battle between nature and nurture (Ridley, 2003). But neither the sociologist, nor the evolutionary psychologist, should seek to deny the role of genetics and the social environment, respectively, in terms of shaping human behavioral outcomes. In other words, evolutionary psychology, at least as it is presented in the context of this book, eschews genetic determinism and accepts that we are all capable of resisting, though perhaps not completely overcoming, our evolutionary impulses that were developed millennia ago in the ancestral environment.

In a similar vein, another important caveat worth noting at the start of this book is that evolutionary psychologists do not assume

that all human beings are selfish egoists only concerned with individual survival and reproduction. Yes, compelling evidence exists that competition, hierarchy, and sexuality are undeniably central to human psychology and behavior, but then again, so are cooperation, egalitarianism, and sexual restraint. Indeed, the collectivist view of human behavior has been shown to be aligned with evolutionary theory, as demonstrated by Trivers' (1971) pioneering work on how "reciprocal altruism" can serve an adaptive function.

With these two caveats in mind, we are now ready to explore the question of how knowledge of evolutionary psychology can shine a new and exciting light on human resource management decision-making.

THE APPLICATION OF EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY TO HRM

This is mostly uncharted terrain. There is a huge amount of literature on evolutionary psychology and, separately, a huge amount on human resource management, but the unique intersection of these two fields is, with a few notable exceptions (Luxen and Van De Vijver, 2006; Fruhen et al., 2015, both described above), largely unmapped territory. This conspicuous lacuna provides an opportune opening for this book. The key research question at the heart of the study is, simply (or perhaps not so simply): are human resource management decisions ultimately rooted in evolved human preferences that are the result of adaptive selections that can be traced back to the dawn of humankind? Throughout this book, various evidences—mostly derived from experimental research designs—will be brought to bear on an evolutionary theory of HRM. In aggregate, they answer this research question in the affirmative.

Chapter 2 presents a theoretical model that sets the stage for the rest of the book. In it, a bio-psycho-social theory of workplace mobbing (also known as workplace bullying) is presented. Victims of mobbing, once expelled from the organization, often struggle to comprehend the depravity and savagery of the perpetrators' behaviors. Mobbing behavior is explained in this chapter as a natural biological response to a threatening work environment. Using evolutionary theory, the chapter describes human mobbing behavior as a function of the deeply embedded survival instinct within all of us.

Ethological evidence of mobbing behavior in the animal kingdom is presented in order to lay the foundations for the theory. It is then argued that an existential threat to one's employment, and thus livelihood, effectively "overrides" the more compassionate socialized self, allowing the egotistical biologic self to "govern" the actions of the individual and the collective behavior of the perpetrator(s). The theory explains how once "good" colleagues and friends can suddenly turn on the victim, unleashing a primal response aimed at the complete decimation and elimination of the threat from the workplace.

Chapter 3 presents what is very likely the first ever empirical study investigating the effect of variations in skin tone among Caucasian job applicants on their perceived employability in the U.S. labor market. It draws from the evolutionary psychology literature to explain employers' apparent aversion to lighter shades of white skin as a function of the perceived (ill) health and (un)attractiveness of the job applicant. Across three separate experiments, the chapter shows that lighter skinned Caucasians are viewed more negatively than those with normal skin tones and darker-than-average skin tones. Among women, it was found that darker skin tones are perceived as more attractive than normal skin tones, but this does not appear to affect employers' perceptions of job applicants' employability. This chapter makes an original empirical and theoretical contribution to the employee selection literature by drawing attention to a previously neglected form of employment discrimination based not on race, but rather on skin tone.

Chapter 4 explores the extent of employment discrimination against non-binary job applicants, i.e., those presenting as neither exclusively male, nor exclusively female. It uses social identity theory to explain why (mostly cisgendered) employers impose discrete male/female categorizations on job applicants. The results suggest that masculine-looking male applicants are rated significantly higher on perceived employability than feminized male applicants, feminine female applicants, and masculinized female applicants. A relative decrease in employability ratings between masculine men and feminized men was found in the experiment, but the same relative reduction was not found between feminine women and masculinized women. Again, this chapter contributes to the employee selection literature in its unique emphasis on understanding the effect of sexual dimorphism on labor market success (or failure).

Chapter 5 examines the previously unexplored question of whether job applicants with asymmetrical facial features are perceived as less employable in comparison to job applicants with symmetrical facial features. The study presents empirical evidence that hiring managers evince a preference for job applicants with symmetrical faces. It is argued that the tenets of evolutionary psychology may explain this finding. More specifically, evolutionary psychologists have posited that symmetrical facial features may signal attractiveness, health, and intelligence. It is, therefore, likely that hiring managers' preferences for job applicants with symmetrical features may well be rooted in our primitive sexual preferences evolved in the ancestral environment.

Chapter 6 concludes the book by examining the role of unconscious bias in human resource management decision-making. It focuses on how this bias shapes looks-centered recruitment and selection and performance management. The chapter argues that implicit biases exist "in the shadow" of consciousness and can impact HR managers' perceptions of potential and actual employees. The chapter draws on the neuro-psychology/neuroscience literature, highlighting how physical attributes, speech, and other mutable corporeal factors are important sources of implicit bias in HR decision-making. The book closes with a call for a more inter-disciplinary approach to studying HRM involving a team effort between the natural and the social sciences.

CONTRIBUTION TO THE HRM LITERATURE

The value of all scientific research ultimately rests in its purported ability to advance knowledge above and beyond what we knew previously by, as it were, "standing on the shoulders of giants," to quote Sir Isaac Newton. Any study that fails to shine a new light on a previously underexplored phenomenon is worth only the paper it is printed on. Even studies that make a so-called incremental contribution to the literature by optimizing our previous understanding of a phenomenon are of limited value. To push the frontiers of science, what is needed, above all else, is the will to break free from disciplinary boundaries and to pursue truly inter-disciplinary solutions to innovative research questions. On this count, this book can be said, with some degree of confidence, to make an important contribution to the field of HRM decision-making, in much the same way that

Saad (2007, 2011) added value to our current understanding of the field of marketing. For those readers that manage to arrive at the end of this book, it is hoped that they will see HRM in a new and exciting light.

In the end, this book will have succeeded if it sparks more questions than it answers. It will be demonstrated that, although the threat of obsolescence (Dundon and Rafferty, 2018) is real, it is not inevitable. Indeed, the field of HRM may well be in its infancy. From evolutionary psychology to the cognitive neurosciences, a brave new world of knowledge awaits us as we step forward into the unknown world of what might be called “evolutionary HRM.”