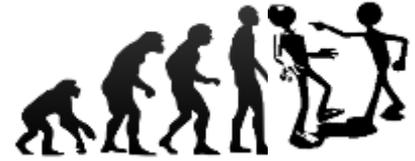


Discuss evolutionary explanations of human aggression (8 and 16 marks)



The evolutionary approach takes the view that the behaviours and cognitive processes that enable an individual to survive will be passed on to the next generation. It therefore argues that all aggression is the result of sexual competition or individual survival.

Males compete (sometimes aggressively) for females in order to pass on their genes and ensure paternity of offspring. Thus aggression can seem to have an adaptive purpose as aggressive males would have more offspring and the offspring would then possess the aggressive characteristics.

Females seem to use verbal aggression as this is thought to be aimed at reducing the “attractiveness” of the competition in the eyes of males.

It is believed that jealousy has evolved as an adaptive response to help prevent infidelity by the development of male-retention strategies such as direct guarding, debasement etc. Infidelity is to be avoided as it is a perceived threat to the relationship. For males this is mostly sexual infidelity due to paternal uncertainty and for females it is emotional infidelity and the associated divergence of resources.

The evolutionary approach has been studied by several researchers. Firstly, Shackelford found that men’s use of retention strategies were directly correlated with violence scores showing a relationship between sexual jealousy, mate retention and violence. However it must be noted that he used a survey method which could be subjected to social desirability bias and he only found a correlation and not causal relationship. These significant problems would reduce the internal validity and the extent to which it can provide support. Nevertheless, in a later study with Buss, he found that men who suspected their wife’s infidelity exacted greater punishment which provides further support for the claim that mate retention strategies are only evoked when a particular adaptive problem is faced.

However, many of the studies and thus our current understanding into mate retention strategies is limited due to gender bias. Even though looking at infidelity and jealousy from the perspective of both genders does seem to take steps to avoid gender bias, it still remains that most studies have focused on males and their aggression towards females as females seem to have less to gain from physical aggression. Yet it still remains that there are women who will commit mariticide. It has even been found that in Norway 1 in 38 men admitted to emergency rooms for assault had been attacked by their wife. This would not seem to make much evolutionary sense as there would clearly be an immense loss of resources by the killing of one’s husband. Therefore the Evolutionary approach cannot provide a complete view of all individual cases and all genders. It also cannot account for the individual differences when, for example, not all men behave in the same way when faced with infidelity.

Nevertheless, one benefit of the approach is that it can provide practical applications in real life. This is because particular tactics of mate retention can be an early indicator of violence against the partner and so can alert friends to the danger signs before an attack is carried out.

However, a firm disadvantage is that the approach cannot account for cultural differences in the importance of violence. For example, among the Yanomamo of South America male violence is required to attain status but among the !Kung San, aggression only leads to reputational damage. In these two different cultures, aggression clearly has a different significance placed upon it but the evolutionary view does not allow for this cultural difference and so it cannot provide a complete view on human aggression.

Lastly, it must be noted that evolutionary psychology hypothesises on human behaviour from 1000's of years ago and so they cannot be scientifically tested or falsified. This would reduce the validity and reliability of this approach into aggression.