There are few areas within evolutionary psychology that have generated a higher book to article ratio than the field of evolutionary psychopathology. And there have indeed been some grand books. However, there is something disheartening about the lack of empirical research and scientific maturation of this field. My clinical research and practice, and academic, empirical evolutionary psychology research rarely interact fruitfully.

I continue to lament the lack of empirical research and scientific research within evolutionary psychopathology, and I am growing steadily wearier of different unsubstantiated speculations on all the different disorders, which seem to be cataloged by every new introduction to this important scientific endeavor. The most influential, original idea within our field is currently the idea that rumination is adaptive (Andrews and Thomson Jr. 2009). That rumination really solves problems. Despite actually gathering data—and this needs to be applauded—this approach is most likely wrong (Kennair et al. 2017). Personally, although I am part of this academic dispute, I am convinced that our clinical research shows that discontinuing rumination is both possible and effective and has lasting effects (Hjemdal et al. 2019). Forthcoming work will report effects for at least for 3 years, with improved quality of life to boot.

Yet, there are several reasons to read this particular book. Randy Nesse manages something exceptional: He presents the wisdom of a lifetime of struggling with academic conundrums from the oddest but most scientific perspective within mental health care, while continuously attempting to battle human despair in the trenches of modern psychiatry practice. This balance of ivory tower musings and data collection with real-life empathy for individual suffering creates a special warmth and deeply humane account of mental disorder. In addition, this is the story of a professional life as a leading clinician and at the same time an outstanding researcher in both fields, but not quite succeeding to achieve the acceptance of the synthesis of these two fascinatingly unconnected magisters. The book is part academic and clinical autobiography, part yet another attempt at building that bridge.

Nevertheless, the paradox of how low the integration of these two fields currently is historically odd. Freud was an evolutionary psychologist, no matter how Lamarckian his arguments could be. Bowlby and Ainsworth were Darwinian, too. Skinner was a self-proclaimed sociobiologist. Aaron Beck of cognitive behavioral therapy fame is positive to evolutionary perspectives. And almost every anxiety therapist takes an evolutionary approach to psychoeducation and normalization of anxiety symptoms: Probably the functional understanding of fear and evolved defense responses is what makes us so efficient in treating anxiety disorder. Despite this, it seems that evolutionary theory just does not appeal to clinicians. However, this is not really that unusual. Several people have recently observed how when an insight or finding from evolutionary psychology becomes generally accepted, it stops being “evolutionary psychology” and turns into merely “psychology.” This is probably true of all subdisciplines, but obviously more likely for fields that elicit any ideological resistance.

Nesse’s theoretical-clinical approach is a result of taking a critical view of two tribes he himself is a member of: He balances on this precarious scaffolding of a bridge between two camps. He is as critical of viewing symptoms as disorders that many psychiatrists tend to do, as he is of viewing disorders as adaptations, the trap many evolutionary-oriented researchers fall into. The integrated evolutionary clinician’s position is, alas, the minority stance. And both majority camps are suspicious of these two criticisms. A major contribution is Nesse’s conceptualization of mental disorders as a possible result of selection stabilizing traits on a cliff edge, maximizing genetic fitness at the detriment of a minority of individuals. Also, every anxiety therapist needs to understand the smoke
detector principle. How this may result in further empirical testing remains the question.

I obviously do not agree with every aspect of the book. As an OCD and GAD therapist, the conceptualizations of OCD as a disorder of little repression or the result of infection, or panic disorder as an escape mechanism, are not spot on, in my opinion (see Kennair 2007; Marks and Nesse 1994). Also, Nesse is probably a lot more positive to psychoanalytic terminology and concepts than I am. I would probably differ between verbal and nonverbal or conscious and non-conscious, rather than invoke any truly, classical psychoanalytic content. However, to me, this is not a problem of the book. Not at all. Rather as a biography of Nesse’s professional and academic life; it is most fitting that it is included. It was no surprise. And it might help interest larger groups of clinicians to evolutionary ideas. Freud and many of his early followers may have been among the first evolutionary psychopathologists; modern psychodynamic therapists rarely are very positive to Darwinian perspectives.

This inclusive and synthetic approach is typical of Nesse’s good-natured approach to the field. While the title addressing evolutionary psychiatry seems a little parochial to me as a clinical psychologist, Nesse is probably one of the most psychologist friendly psychiatrists I know of. This is a synthetic and integrative work, as any truly biopsychosocial and evolutionary approach would need to be. It may be critical of some mainstream trends within his own profession, but in general, Nesse appreciates the contributions of several approaches and perspectives, ruling out very few. Simple and single solutions get little traction in this book, though. He is positive to psychoanalysis, behavioral therapy, and cognitive approaches, even the newer developments. Also, he does not wish for evolutionary approaches do be considered a specific treatment approach, as this tends towards sectarian in- og outgroup behavior. As such, the message is mostly only provocative to the fanatics.

One of the more puzzling aspects of the book is who the intended audience is. The book probably is meant a bridge, aiming to connect both mental health professionals and evolutionary researchers. The book is obviously not a psychiatry textbook. Although I do believe many current psychiatrists in spe will benefit from reading it. Clinical psychologists, too, of course. As the memoirs and sage advice of a major figure in their field, Nesse champions a more inclusive, broad approach. The lack of scientific development within the narrow medicine and brain disorder focused psychiatry needs to be countered with a more flexible understanding of the contributions of many fields and perspectives, in general. Avoiding the most foundational theory of behavior, evolution, will surely not help.

The book is well written. And the many patients Nesse remembers with empathy, warmth, and regard, even with a pointed but good-natured sense of humor, bring the history and reality of mental disorder alive with detail that reveals a scientist who wishes to understand, a clinician that wants to help, and a teacher that knows how to explain something complex in an understandable manner.

Will the book result in more interest in evolutionary approaches among clinicians? And more interest in researching mental disorder among evolutionary psychologists? More actual research. More empirical papers testing evolutionary hypotheses and predictions. I hope so. I guess that is what evolutionary psychopathology as a field really needs.

References


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