

# The Application of Biological, Evolutionary, and Sociocultural Frameworks to Issues of Gender in Introductory Psychology Textbooks

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**Abstract** The purpose of this paper is to explore the application of biological, evolutionary, and sociocultural frameworks to issues of gender in the 10 most popular introductory psychology textbooks in the U.S. The use of these metatheories is of interest to feminist scholars because they have implications for the extent to which students learn that gender and gender differences are fixed and innate or socially constructed. If gender and gender differences are seen as malleable, then efforts at social change to improve women's status or men's and women's abilities or opportunities can be understood as promising endeavors. The relative use of these three frameworks differed dramatically across books, affording all scholars the opportunity to actively select those texts whose prominent frameworks best align with their course goals. The paper concludes with suggestions for which books offer the most thorough coverage of sociocultural frameworks.

**Keywords** Evolutionary psychology · Biological psychology · Social psychology · Cultural psychology · Feminism · Teaching · Social construction

## Introduction

In their commitment to ending sexism and sexist discrimination (Hooks 2000), feminist psychologists tend to apply

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and pursue theories that emphasize men and women's commonalities (e.g., Hyde 2005), the malleability of gender-typed behaviors and characteristics, and the wide within-gender variation found in most behaviors and attributes (e.g., Eagly and Wood 2011). Theories that present gender differences as fundamental and/or fixed, such as those that tie gender differences in behavior, cognition, or affect to biology or evolution (Eagly 1995), tend to be less preferred (e.g., Chrisler and Erchull 2011; Contratto 2002; Eagly and Wood 2011). Although they remain steeped in controversy, biological and evolutionary metatheories have been growing in popularity in psychological science over the past 15 years (Confer et al. 2010). Chrisler and Erchull (2011) have suggested that the renewed enthusiasm for biological explanations may be regarded as a backlash against feminist gains because such explanations imply that "women should be content with their lot" (p. 755). Eagly and Wood (2011) have additionally cautioned that Darwinian perspectives on sex differences "hold out little potential for gender equality" (p. 75).

In this review, we examine the treatment of research on women and gender across the 10 most popular introductory psychology textbooks in the U.S. today (Bowker 2010), used also in Eagly et al. (2012). Specifically, we explored the application of biological, evolutionary, and sociocultural frameworks in these textbooks to provide context and explanation for gender-related findings, focusing especially on accounts for gender-differentiated behaviors. The content of undergraduate psychology textbooks is of interest to scholars because it reflects the dominant ideology of a given time (Unger 2010) and because it is one of the primary ways that ideology is transmitted to the next generation of consumers and producers of psychological research. Furthermore, the dominant metatheories and ideologies in textbooks have the potential to be mistaken for fact by novice students, especially when presented uncritically. In the case of biological and evolutionary frameworks, mistaking theory or conjecture for fact may proliferate

students' general reliance on "just so" stories for explaining all kinds of human behavior, cognition, and emotion (Looren De Jong and Van Der Steen 1998). The use of these metatheories is of particular interest to feminist scholars because each one places a different level of emphasis on whether gender and gender differences are characterized as fixed and innate or responsive to and stemming from social and environmental variables. To the extent that students view gender and gender differences as malleable, they may see greater promise in efforts at improving women's status or men's and women's abilities or opportunities. It is important for colleagues teaching introductory psychology courses, then, to determine how to present these issues in their classes and to select texts that place more or less emphasis on biological or evolutionary frameworks based on their course goals.

We recognize there is a great deal of overlap between biological and evolutionary frameworks given that evolution is a "fundamental tenant in the field of biology" (Gallagher and Nelson 2003, p. ix). However, these metatheories are frequently discussed separately in textbooks, journal articles, and handbooks. The Handbook of Psychology (2003), for example, includes a chapter on evolutionary psychology in the volume on biological psychology, treating it as one of many biological approaches alongside the study of behavior genetics and specific biological systems (Durrant and Ellis 2003). Evolutionary psychologists have described the evolutionary approach as its own "major theoretical perspective" (Confer et al. 2010, p. 110) that has emerged as a "hybrid discipline that draws insights from modern evolutionary theory [and] biology" among other domains (Buss and Schmitt 2011, p. 768). This distinction may be in part because evolutionary explanations tend to focus on social events and measures, and often emphasize the role of evolved personal and interpersonal motives (e.g., Neuberg et al. 2010), while biological approaches focus on physiological events and measures (for a review see Thompson and Zola 2003) and do not often evoke motives, needs, and goals.

We chose to focus on these three frameworks because of their differential implications for feminist theory and practice. If the differences observed in men and women's behavior are described as natural or inevitable, as biological and evolutionary metatheories often contend, then society's differential treatment of men and women may also be interpreted as natural and inevitable, making attempts to equalize the balance of power and opportunities in society appear unfeasible or inappropriate. On the other hand, sociocultural explanations recognize that many gender differences can be reduced or reversed as a function of environmental variables (such as membership in dominant versus subordinate groups; Miller 1986) and that one key reason for several gender differences is women's relative lack of access to and experience with power, money, and status across the globe.

## Method

Qualitative analyses of all 10 textbooks were performed through careful reading of each page of each textbook as performed independently by two coders, the two authors of this paper. First, the coders read through the introductory chapter of each book, and noted all major theoretical frameworks explicitly presented there (see Table 1). Intercoder agreement on these items was 100 %. Next, all research on sex and gender was located through page-by-page searches of each textbook. Each coder searched for and noted all textbook pages on which any instance of any of the following terms occurred, in relation to humans only: sex, gender, women (woman), mother(s), and girl(s), female(s), and feminine. Intercoder agreement as to the presence of these terms by page was high (Cohen's kappa=.96), and errors were corrected until 100 % agreement was reached.

The coders then searched through those pages of text discussing sex and gender in each book for the application of biological, evolutionary, and sociocultural frameworks. For the purpose of this paper, biological frameworks included those that mentioned biological factors as being responsible for gender-related findings, including anatomy, hormones, chromosomes, etc. Evolutionary frameworks were those that explicitly attributed gender related findings to the evolution of instincts, behaviors, needs, motives, etc. Social and cultural frameworks were frequently discussed interchangeably and in combination and included the effects of social roles, stereotypes, scripts, learning, and culture on gender differentiated behaviors.

The coders also looked through all text on sex and gender for the presence of a select set of currently popular topics and findings related to the three metatheories of interest to this paper (Table 2). Specifically, the coders looked for: a) biological explanations for gender differences in the brain, b) biological explanations for differences in men and women's intelligence or ability, c) evolutionary explanations for gender differences in attraction and sexual behavior, d) evolutionary explanations for men and women's responses to stress, e) sociocultural explanations for gender differences in intelligence or ability, and f) sociocultural explanations for gender differences in attraction and sexual behavior (see Table 2). Finally, explicitly feminist or androcentric or sexist statements were recorded.

## Results

### Biological Frameworks

All 10 textbooks presented biology as an explanatory framework in their introductory chapter (see Table 1), though

**Table 1** Theoretical frameworks presented in the first chapter of 10 introductory psychology textbooks

		Biological	Evolutionary	Learning	Cognitive	Socio-cultural	Psycho-dynamic	Other
1.	Coon and Mitterer (2010)	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Positive Psychology
2.	Feldman (2011)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Humanism
3.	Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Structuralism Functionalism Humanism Positive Psychology
4.	Huffman (2008)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Humanism
5.	Kalat (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	None
6.	King (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Humanism
7.	Myers (2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Structuralism Functionalism Humanism
8.	Schacter et al. (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Structuralism Functionalism
9.	Wade and Tavris (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Humanism; Feminist Psychology
10.	Weiten (2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Structuralism Functionalism Humanism Positive Psychology

some mentioned it only in the context of neuroscience (i.e., Feldman 2011; King 2011; Schacter, Gilbert, & Wegner 2011). All 10 texts also mentioned biological differences between men and women, such as differences in men's and women's brain structure, hormone production, chromosomes, body shape and size, maturation processes and timing, and reproductive processes and organs. One of the more trendy topics in biology and gender in these books (featured often in separate full-page boxes and modules with color photos) was gender differences in the brain, mentioned by 8 out of 10 books (Table 2). Moreover, 6 of the 10 books mentioned the possibility that brain or hormonal differences may be partly responsible for gender differences in language ability or in spatial ability (Table 2).

Feldman (2011) and Schacter et al. (2011) appeared to devote the most attention to biological gender differences, portraying them as antecedents that directly caused behavioral differences. For instance, Feldman noted: "... differences in brain lateralization may account, in part, for the superiority often displayed by females on certain measures of verbal skills, such as the onset of fluency and speech" (p. 90). Schacter et al. (2011) emphasized that the hormone oxytocin may be responsible for sex differences in the tendency to seek out social contacts when under stress (p. 642), that testosterone plays a large part in causing male aggression (p. 508), and that testosterone may serve as "the hormonal basis of sex drive in both men and women" (p. 335).

**Table 2** Presence of at least one mention of select issues using biological, evolutionary, and sociocultural explanations

		Biological explanation for gender differences in		Evolutionary explanation for gender differences in		Sociocultural explanation for gender differences in	
		Brain structure	Intelligence/ability	Attraction/sexual behavior	Responses to stress	Intelligence/ability	Attraction/sexual behavior
1.	Coon and Mitterer (2010)	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
2.	Feldman (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
3.	Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
4.	Huffman (2008)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
5.	Kalat (2011)	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
6.	King (2011)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
7.	Myers (2010)	No	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
8.	Schacter et al (2011)	No	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
9.	Wade and Tavris (2011)	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes
10.	Weiten (2010)	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Others proposed similar biological bases for gendered behavior but were cautious in drawing conclusions. For example, Myers (2010) wrote that “exposure to high levels of male sex hormones during the prenatal period does enhance spatial abilities” (p. 433). However, he then pointed out the potential role of experience in producing these differences, noting that action video game playing can also improve spatial abilities (p. 433). He also reminds the reader that men and women are quite similar biologically, saying: “your ‘opposite’ sex is, in reality, your very similar sex. And should we be surprised? Among your 46 chromosomes, 45 are unisex” (p. 159).

Most authors noted biological differences, but with warnings about interpreting these differences, such as Hockenbury and Hockenbury’s (2010) summary that: “despite decades of research, we still do not know the functional significance of most sex differences in the brain” (p. 77). Similarly, Weiten (2010) noted that “no one is really sure” how gender differences in brain organization and structure might account for gender differences in cognitive abilities (p. 482). In addition, some authors allowed that differences in brain structure or function might be the result of learning, socialization, and behavior, rather than the cause (e.g., Feldman 2011, p. 91; Hockenbury and Hockenbury 2010, p. 77; Wade and Tavris 2011, p. 134).

Wade and Tavris (2011) and Coon and Mitterer (2010) appeared to rely the least on biological differences to explain gender-differentiated behavior, concluding that: “a brain difference does not necessarily produce a difference in behavior or performance” (Wade and Tavris 2011, p. 134) and “although it would be a mistake to ignore this biological basing, most human sex-linked behaviors are influenced much more by learning than is the case for animals” (Coon and Mitterer 2010, p. 363).

### Evolutionary Frameworks

Nine of the 10 textbooks, with the exception of Feldman (2011), presented evolution as an explanatory framework in their introductory chapter (see Table 1). However all authors gave at least one evolutionary explanation for gender related findings at some point in their text. The most common application of the evolutionary perspective, mentioned in all 10 texts, was to explain gender differences in attraction and sexual behavior (Table 2), though this was used to greater and lesser degrees. Three texts also applied evolutionary theory to men and women’s differential responses to stress (fight-or-flight vs. tend-and-befriend; e.g., Taylor et al. 2000) (Table 2).

The most enthusiasm for evolutionary psychology appeared to be in Weiten (2010) and Schacter et al. (2011). For instance, Weiten (2010) devoted several pages to research supporting evolutionary explanations for gender

differences in mating preferences (e.g., pp. 407–412; 481; 667; 679–680), concluding that “the findings on gender differences in sexual motivation mesh very nicely with predictions derived from evolutionary theory” (p. 412). Weiten (2010) briefly acknowledged the criticism that evolutionary theories are so flexible they can “explain almost anything,” including patterns of findings that oppose the theory’s initial predictions (p. 481). However, he also gave the tongue-in-cheek reminder that “in the world of science, everyone is a critic” and that while cultural and social factors might also affect mating choices “the cultural and economic processes at work may themselves be the products of evolution” (p. 412). Schacter et al. (2011) also used evolutionary explanations to support findings on gender and sex, noting that women prefer older mates than men do because “a youthful appearance is a signal of a woman’s ability to bear children, just as a mature appearance is a signal of a man’s ability to raise them” (p. 520).

Most authors (9 of 10, with the exception of Schacter et al. 2011) also paired the application of evolutionary psychology to issues of gender with at least a nod to a social or cultural explanation. Several mentioned that men’s and women’s sexual behaviors and preferences are highly flexible and variable within and across cultures (e.g., Huffman 2008, p. 391; Myers 2010, p. 148). Kalat (2011) noted that women can gain many benefits from having multiple partners, both in modern society and throughout evolutionary history, including the potential for receiving resources from multiple men and “trading up” from a less resourceful mate to a more resourceful one (p. 485), calling into question the likelihood that it was typically adaptive for women, throughout human history, to be less sexually promiscuous than men. Some authors (e.g., Huffman 2008, p. 391; King 2011, p. 356; Hockenbury and Hockenbury 2010, p. 436) also mentioned the finding from social role theory (e.g., Eagly, 1987) that sex differences in partner preferences decrease in societies where women have more reproductive freedom, social power, and educational opportunities (Kasser and Sharma 1999). Feldman (2011) also critiqued the evolutionary explanation for gender differences in reactions to partner infidelity using DeSteno et al. (2002) socially-grounded “double shot” hypothesis (p. 353), which suggests that men and women have different expectations about the implications of sexual and emotional infidelity.

However, the majority of the texts dedicated more space to evolutionary theory than to critiques of the theory, mirroring what Chrisler and Erchull (2011) found on the coverage of evolutionary psychology in social psychology textbooks. The evolutionary framework was also often the first framework presented in sections on gender differences and similarities, especially sections on mate selection (e.g., Coon and Mitterer 2010, p. 562; King 2011, p. 353; Wade and Tavris 2011, p. 81), followed by “additional views” (King 2011, p. 355) such as social construction or social cognitive

approaches. For example, Weiten (2010) noted that “the most thoroughly documented findings on the evolutionary bases of heterosexual attraction are those on gender differences in mating preferences” which appear to “transcend history and culture” (p. 679), and that even the qualifications and caveats to the typical findings on gender differences in mating preferences “make evolutionary sense” (p. 679). Additionally, socio-cultural approaches were often described as implicitly secondary or inferior explanations to evolutionary theory, and were variously described as an “important alternative” (Huffman 2008, p. 391), or as a “key criticism” (Myers 2010, p. 148).

The authors providing the least coverage of evolutionary theory when discussing gender differences were King (2011) and Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010). For example, Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010) said the finding that men report preferring more sexual partners than women (a finding that evolutionary theorists would say is fundamental) should be “taken with a grain of salt” because of men and women’s tendency to “distort their responses to better match gender norms and expectations- although in opposite directions” (p. 426).

#### Sociocultural Frameworks

Nine of the 10 textbooks presented a sociocultural perspective in their introductory chapter (see Table 1), with Feldman (2011) being the only exception. However, all authors gave at least one sociocultural explanation for gender-related findings somewhere in their text. These accounts included discussions of gender stereotypes and roles, gender socialization and learning, gender identity, gender bias, and cultural gender norms. Sociocultural accounts were often applied to research on men’s and women’s performance and ability. For instance, all 10 texts specifically mentioned stereotype threat as one reason for women’s poorer performance on tests of math and spatial ability, and 9 out of 10 texts gave a sociocultural explanation for gender differences in attraction and/or sexual behavior (Table 2). Myers (2010) even introduced stereotype threat as possibly playing a role in women’s chess performance (p. 438), while Hockenbury & Hockenbury (2010) described how gender stereotypes can undermine women’s driving performance (p. 325).

Sociocultural explanations for gender differences received the most emphasis from Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010) and Wade and Tavris (2011). In their chapter on gender and sexuality, Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010) described gender stereotypes and roles in detail, and gave a strong social constructivist account for gender differences, noting that “acknowledging that a gender difference exists does not automatically mean that such differences are ‘natural,’ ‘inevitable,’ or ‘unchangeable.’

Nor does it mean that the differences are biologically based” (p. 424), Wade and Tavris (2011) explained how sexual scripts contribute to gender differences in sexual behavior (pp. 452–453), how sexual attitudes and motives change with women’s economic status (p. 454), and presented thorough and well-developed critiques of evolutionary explanations (pp. 82–85) and biological ones (e.g., pp. 133–134) that highlighted interactions between evolutionary, biological, and sociocultural factors and bidirectional causality.

Feldman (2011) discussed gender roles, sexism, and gender schemas in detail, and gave a social explanation for the paucity of women in upper-level management positions, noting that “even when women are successful on the job and are promoted into upper-level, high-status positions, they may face significant hurdles in their efforts to move up the corporate ladder” (p. 345). Weiten (2010) mentioned families, schools, and the media as sources of gender role socialization (p. 482). King (2011) discussed gender schemas and stereotypes as part of early social learning, teaching children about “how females and males should think, act, and feel” (p. 355), and Huffman (2008) described how gender schemas and gender-typed behaviors are learned through operant conditioning, observation, and imitation over time (p. 378). Kalat (2011) explained that gender differences vary across time and across cultures, giving the example that “some cultures define cooking as women’s work, and others define it as men’s work” (p. 510).

Several authors also mentioned gender differences in access to and experience with social power and status as contributing to gender-differentiated behavior, including Myers (2010), Kalat (2011), King (2011), Coon and Mitterer (2010), Huffman (2008). For example, Kalat (2011, p. 182) wrote that “...most people believe that men outperform women in mathematics. Males significantly outperform females in countries where men have greater economic and political status than women. In countries where men and women have nearly equal status, the difference in average math performance disappears.” Coon and Mitterer (2010) echoed this sentiment, noting that “Most male–female performance gaps can be traced to *social* differences in the power and opportunities given to men and women. Unequal power tends to exaggerate differences between men and women, and then makes the artificial differences appear to be real” (p. 364).

Schacter et al. (2011) and Coon and Mitterer (2010) gave minimal attention to sociocultural explanations. Schacter et al. (2011) did not mention gender at all in their textbook section on stereotypes (the categories of race and religion were primarily used as examples in this section; pp. 536–541). In addition, although they discussed how the negative stereotype about women’s math ability may hinder women’s math performance (p. 416), this morsel was presaged with the statement: “...intelligence is a valuable commodity, and it just doesn’t seem fair for a few groups to corner the



market by accidents of birth or geography . . . . But fair or not, the fact is that some groups routinely outscore others on intelligence tests” (p. 414).

### Feminist and Androcentric Statements

Careful examination of the 10 textbooks included in our review revealed some pro-woman and feminist statements as well as a few explicitly sexist or androcentric statements. Feminist statements included Myers’ (2010) and Coon and Mitterer’s (2010) descriptions of some of the negative consequences of rigid gender roles for men’s and women’s well-being. Myers (2010) noted that gender roles many not reflect what is biologically natural for men and women, and that the social predictability and ease generated by gender roles comes at the cost of creating anxiety for those who deviate from role norms (p. 164). Coon and Mitterer (2010, p. 369) similarly acknowledged the detrimental effects of gender-typed sexual scripts on women’s sexual satisfaction, noting that “exaggerating the differences between male and female sexuality is not only inaccurate, it can also create artificial barriers to sexual satisfaction. For example, assuming that men should always initiate sex denies the fact that women have comparable sexual interests and needs.” They also discussed how gender stereotypes can be a career obstacle for women, including the problem of unequal pay for comparable work (p. 365).

Likewise, Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010) noted that “...some people are quick to equate gender difference with a gender deficiency. For example, women’s differences from men have historically been used to suggest women are inferior to men” (p. 423). Wade and Tavris (2011, p. 453) addressed the sexual double-standard and its harmful effects on women, and both Feldman (2011, p. 365) and Myers (2010, p. 164) discussed the double standard for the distribution of household and child-rearing tasks among working couples. Several authors also mentioned how psychological science has been affected by gender bias and stereotypes. King (2011), for example, wrote that “In selecting a sample, researchers much strive to minimize bias, including gender bias... Early research in the field often included just the male experience-not only because the researchers themselves were often male, but also because the participants too were typically male... For a long time, the human experience studied by psychology was primarily the male experience” (p. 42).

There were relatively few explicitly androcentric statements, although we did uncover a few. Schacter et al. (2011, p. 334) suggested to their undergraduate female readers that they might trade sex for help with child care from their male partners specifically stating that “For females who are trying to keep their mates at home so that they will contribute to the rearing of the children, sexual interest that is continuous and independent of fertility may be an excellent strategy.” In

a section on intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation, these authors also describe a series of small and large personal goals as all being privately motivated by the desire to “get dates”: “When we floss our teeth so we can avoid gum disease (and get dates), when we work hard for money so we can pay our rent (and get dates), and when we take an exam so we can get a college degree (and get money to get dates), we are extrinsically motivated” (p. 338). The fact that the authors mention the need for money to go on dates suggests that they are considering these goals from a male perspective, as males typically pay for first dates (for a review see Eaton and Rose 2011). Finally, as an example of a behavioral gender difference, Kalat (2011) glibly cited “The more pairs of shoes you own, the higher is the probability that you are female” (p. 181).

### Conclusion

This brief overview is intended to be useful to faculty who teach introductory psychology courses. We recommend that instructors review the introductory chapters of the textbooks they are considering for course adoption to determine if the coverage of biological, evolutionary, and sociocultural frameworks is suitable for their classes. There appears to be agreement among introductory textbook authors that all three frameworks are important to include. Most authors attempted to provide some integration of the perspectives or at least present opposing views. A few tended to accept biological and evolutionary explanations more fully than sociocultural ones (e.g., Schacter et al. 2011).

A few others devoted more consideration to the social construction of gender. In particular, we found that Wade and Tavris (2011); Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010), and Myers (2010) were very thorough in their applications of sociocultural theories and in their critiques of evolutionary psychology. These particular books are also appropriate for feminist teachers because they take a broad and multifaceted view of gender and sex. Wade and Tavris (2011) explicitly mention feminist psychology as a valid theoretical approach to psychology (e.g., p. 22), and repeatedly caution the reader about oversimplifying gender differences “as one popular book after another keeps doing” (p. 134). Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010, p. xxxi) and Myers (2010, p. xviii) both integrate coverage of gender across their textbook so the psychology of women is not ghettoized. Hockenbury and Hockenbury (2010) also take pains to point out contributions to the field made by female researchers (p. xxx), while Myers (2010) repeatedly mentions men and women’s similarities (e.g., pp. 159, 432, 614). For texts with minimal critiques of biological and evolutionary perspectives, we recommend that supplemental readings such as Wood and Eagly (2002; 2007) and Hyde (2005) be

assigned to encourage critical thinking and inspire discussion in the classroom. It is particularly important to give examples so that students understand that biological and evolutionary explanations for many gender differences typically can be explained by sociocultural processes as well.

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