

THE 'ANIMAL' WITHIN: A REVIEW OF THE RATIONAL ANIMAL

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A Review of the Book

The Rational Animal: How Evolution Made Us Smarter Than We Think

by Douglas T. Kenrick and Valadas Griskevicius. 2013.

Basic Books, New York, 269 pages.

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Douglas Kenrick and Vlad Griskevicius's (2013) new book, *The Rational Animal*, provides a non-academic audience a window into how our modern-day minds are still influenced by our evolutionary past. Kenrick and Griskevicius act as "tour guides" (2013, p. xv) through nine different chapters, each exploring how seemingly irrational behavior may have 'rational' evolutionary roots.

The authors focus on the "animal' within the so-called rational animal" (2013, p. xii), or the ancestral decision-maker that lives inside the modern man. Kenrick and Griskevicius propose that decision making comes from 'deep-rationality', which is based on the successes and failures of ancestral decision making. Deep rationality functions outside of our consciousness, coaxing us toward making certain seemingly irrational decisions, such as buying a luxury bejeweled Cadillac instead of a practical Honda Civic. The Cadillac could be a display of wealth that increases status in order to attract potential mates. Under such conditions, the purchase of a Cadillac could be an evolutionarily rational decision.

Each chapter is an examination of the different kinds of irrational decisions an individual may encounter during his or her lifetime, and uses pop-culture examples to reinforce the

central points. Many of these introductory examples can help novice readers relate to the more complex evolutionary themes that are presented.

For example, the first chapter starts with a successful discussion of Joe Kennedy's irrational decisions to make risky business ventures (such as bootlegging and high-stakes investments) to demonstrate how irrational and risky decisions can have a high payoff. Kennedy's success in industry would allow him greater access to mates and would aid in the survival of his offspring; therefore on an evolutionary level, these decisions exemplify 'deep rationality'.

The second chapter, which discusses our seven sub-selves, opens by comparing two sides of Martin Luther King, Jr. Dr. King is mainly remembered for his powerful Civil Rights leadership and his outstanding moral character, but in contrast to what he is remembered for, Dr. King did not always behave morally. For example, Dr. King engaged in several extramarital affairs. The authors claim that at a "deeper evolutionary level" (2013, p.24) we possess multiple sub-selves that change our preferences and desires depending on which sub-self is operating. Dr. King's extramarital affairs may exemplify the conflict between the mate retention sub-self and mate acquisition sub-self. The authors stress that recognition of the various sub-selves does not justify bad behavior; rather it can provide insight as to why humans make paradoxical decisions.

The use of pop-culture examples and their relation to evolutionary themes is one of the many positive qualities of this book. However, *The Rational Animal* does have several flaws. My main criticism of this book stems from the constant theme that many of the decisions we make are largely unconscious. This is problematic when the authors discuss some behaviors related to mate acquisition.

The discussion of mate acquisition begins in chapter one and continues in chapter seven, which examines why we prefer luxury items over practical items, and chapter eight, which covers the "sexual economics" of men and women (p. 161). In chapter one, the authors explain that males engage in more risky behavior when in the presence of attractive females and imply that this is largely unconscious.

To support this claim, they cite Ronnay and von Hippel (2010). This study measured the testosterone levels of male skateboarders while doing tricks in front of an attractive female experimenter. Male skateboarders took more risks and had greater successes and failures at more difficult tricks when in the presence of this experimenter. Though this study found that the males had higher levels of testosterone in the presence of the female experimenter, there was no check to see if the males were conscious of their behavior. It seems plausible that men are in fact consciously aware that they are taking more risks because they are trying to impress a woman they want to court.

In chapters seven and eight, unconscious behavior transitions from risk-taking to resource acquisition with the goal of attracting potential mates. Again, it seems as though men knowingly purchase items that display their wealth in order to attract attention from potential mates. The same argument also applies to women's consumer behavior. The authors discuss that women spend billions of dollars per year on makeup and clothing to

make themselves appear more attractive to partners. Yet while women may not be consciously aware of the evolutionary roots of wearing red and sexual signaling (Elliot & Pazda, 2012), it is reasonable to believe that women may make a conscious decision to wear red in order to attract a potential partner.

The authors' argument about unconscious decision making does seem to hold true when they discuss economic decision making and the behaviors associated with fast-paced and slow-paced life history strategies. In chapter six, entitled 'Living Fast and Dying Young', Kenrick and Griskevicius use the example of the economic rise and fall of musician MC Hammer. After acquiring 33 million dollars' worth of assets, he found himself in 13 million dollars of debt six years later due to his extensive spending. Hammer's seemingly irrational spending habits are rational from an evolutionary perspective. Hammer grew up in an environment that supported a fast-paced life history strategy. A fast-paced life history strategy is characterized by "risk-taking, impulsivity, and a dangerous lifestyle that can often lead to early death" (Kenrick & Griskevicius, 2013, p. 119). Hammer's lavish spending makes sense on a deeper rational level because his early developmental environment prepared him for a shorter lifespan.

For people who are not familiar with Evolutionary Psychology, this book provides an excellent overview of the discipline and makes evolution relevant to modern life. The discussion of basic evolutionary concepts and the chapter on the sexual decisions made by men and women were very accessible. However, those already familiar with the field may find that the analysis of the supporting articles is insufficient to bolster the authors' claims. Additionally, because *The Rational Animal* is intended for a non-academic audience, the pop-culture references may seem forced and potentially distract from the main points of the chapters. Overall, however, *The Rational Animal* would be an excellent introduction for people interested in learning about their daily behavior from an evolutionary perspective.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Laura Johnsen is a graduate student in the Anthropology Department at Binghamton University under the advisement of Dr. Chris Reiber. In 2014, she received her M.A. degree in Anthropology and has a B.A. in Psychology from SUNY New Paltz. Johnsen is interested in understanding sexual coercion from an evolutionary perspective.

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