

Evolution & Human Behavior

Winter 2011

The theory of evolution by natural selection is the underlying theme that unites all fields of biology. In this course we will cover the basic principles of evolution, explore ways in which evolutionary theory can be applied to human biology and behavior, and consider how evolutionary thinking might guide the development of social policy. We will consider questions such as these:

- Why are women and men different?
- Which is more egalitarian: monogamy or polygamy?
- Why do step-parents and step-children often have more conflicted relationships than biological parents and biological children?
- When do people cooperate, when are they selfish, and why?
- What can we do to reduce the rate of spousal abuse and homicide?

Objectives

My goal is to help students learn selection thinking; that is, to help them learn to reason like evolutionary biologists. I hope to help students pose questions, formulate hypotheses, design experiments, and critically evaluate the quality of evidence. After taking this course, students will be able to:

- Apply evolutionary theory to human interactions, especially those involving social conflict, and make predictions about how the divergent interests of the parties involved will affect their behavior.
- Design observational studies and experiments to test these predictions.
- Interpret and critically evaluate graphs and tables showing data on behavioral patterns in humans and animals.
- Provide evolutionary interpretations of various human social institutions, such as laws, wills, and social policies.

Time & Place

H A&S 221 B: T Th 10:30-12:20 in MGH 248

H A&S 221 C: T Th 12:30-2:20 in MGH 242

Instructor

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Readings

Most assigned readings will be from the two required texts:

- *Spent*, by Geoffrey Miller, is an entertaining and provocative discussion of how evolutionary reasoning can be used to understand consumer behavior in modern capitalist societies—and how that behavior might be changed. Miller is an advocate—sometimes to the point of extrapolating beyond the data—but he is a clear and honest one.
- *Evolution for Everyone*, by David Sloan Wilson, is a readable and wide-ranging book on how selection thinking can be productively applied to human behavior. Wilson is a partisan in an ongoing debate about the importance of individual vs. group selection. I do not agree with everything Wilson says, nor will you. But the book will provide ample food for thought and fodder for discussion.

Other readings will be made available via the course website.

Assignments, Papers, and Grading

Grades for the course will be based on papers, assignments, participation in class and web discussions, and a collaborative research project. There will be no exams.

Papers (40% of course grade)

Five papers will be due at approximately two-week intervals. Papers must be double spaced, on single-sided 8 1/2 by 11 inch white pages, with at least 1 inch margins, in a font no smaller than 10 point. We will not read past the end of the second page. Papers will be graded for accuracy of content, clarity of writing, and originality of thought. Unless you have made a prior arrangement with one of us, late papers will penalized 1/2 grade point for every day they are late. We will give more detailed instructions for the papers in class.

Assignments and participation in discussions (40% of course grade)

For most discussion meetings there will be at least one written assignment to be completed in advance and at least one written assignment to be completed in class. These assignments may include problems to solve, data to analyze, readings to critique, and questions to ponder. We strongly encourage you to talk with your classmates while working on the assignments, but all written answers, graphs, etc., must be your own work. This includes in-class assignments.

Assignments to be completed before class will be posted on the course website for you to download and print no later than 48 hours before they are due. These assignments will be due at the beginning of class.

Assignments to be completed in class will be handed out in class. They are due at the end of class. Some of these assignments may be too long to complete during class. Don't worry about it! We are more interested in the quality and depth of your discussions than in whether you finish all the questions.

Assignments will be graded on a check, check-plus, check-minus system.

No assignments will be accepted late—doing so would defeat their purpose in stimulating discussion.

To encourage you to keep up with and discuss the readings, we will pose questions via GoPost. You will not be graded on what you say, but you will get course credit for participating. Questions will be posted at least 24 hours before class. To receive credit, you must participate in the discussion before class begins.

Collaborative research project (20% of course grade)

The objective for this project is to give you some experience doing your own scientific research.

Part 1. Working with two or three of your classmates, pose a question about human behavior and suggest a hypothesis about the answer. Design a study to answer your question. Prepare a research proposal describing the logic of your study and submit it for our approval.

Part 2. Collect and analyze data. Compare your results to your predictions and draw a conclusion. Discuss the strengths and weaknesses of your study, consider the significance of your results in the context of other scientists' work, and suggest avenues for future research. Your final report will be due on the day of our final exam.

Part 3. Present your work to your classmates during our final-exam-day symposium.

We will give additional details on this project in class.

Course Website

I have set up a website for the course. It features:

- Homework assignments
- Paper assignments
- Readings
- Supplementary materials
- A weekly schedule
- Online surveys and discussions
- Links to other sites of interest

The URL for the website is:

<http://web.me.com/jonherron/ehb11>

Access to the website requires a username and password. I will announce these in class. Please notify me immediately if anything seems amiss on the website or with the files posted there—I'm human; I make mistakes.

Students with Disabilities

If you have a disability, please speak with us about how we can accommodate you during the class.

Tentative Schedule of Topics

Please note that the following schedule of topics is flexible, based on your background and interests. We want to learn from you what issues in evolution and human behavior are most compelling and important from your perspective. Read *Spent* and *Evolution for Everyone*, browse the library, the newspaper, and the web, and let us know what you want to cover.

Week One: Selection Thinking

Origin of modern humans, adult lactase persistence, and natural selection
Studying adaptation

Week Two: Darwinian Medicine

Who benefits? Pathogens and behavior in humans and other animals
Adaptation to what environment? The trouble with time travel

Week Three: Introduction to Evolutionary Psychology

The challenge of studying human behavioral adaptations
Sexual selection

Week Four: Mate Guarding & Marriage

Why people marry, monogamy vs. polygamy
Confidence in paternity, sperm competition, mate guarding & parental care

Week Five: Genetics, determinism, and behavioral strategies

Basic human genetics, genes in populations
Determinism versus flexible behavioral strategies

Week Six: Kinship and altruism

Inbreeding and the genetics of mate choice
Selfishness and kin selected altruism

Week Seven: Games and Economic Behavior

Reciprocal altruism, prisoner's dilemma, the ultimatum game
Punishment and cooperation

Week Eight: Groups and group selection

Group selection
Religion

Week Nine: Inner lives

Deception and self-deception
Free will

Week Ten: Darwinism and Social Policy

Who makes the rules and whose interests do they serve?
Crime and punishment