Evolutionary Psychiatry Special Interest Group (EPSIG)

Newsletter October 2021

- Editor: Dr Annie Swanepoel (Consultant Child & Adol. Psychiatrist) annie.panzer@gmail.com
- EPSIG Chair: Dr Paul St John-Smith (Consultant Psychiatrist) paulstjohnsmith@hotmail.com
- Finance Officer: Dr Riadh Abed (Consultant Psychiatrist) abedrt@btinternet.com
- EPSIG YouTube Channel: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHyW9iyWB4jcQTequ-Nrq5w
- EPSIG web Pages: www.epsig.org

Contents: 1. Notes from the editor

2. Update on past and future meetings

3. A contribution from Dr Steve Heigham

1. Notes from the Editor

I hope that you have had some rest over the summer and are raring to go. We have some wonderful evolutionary opportunities for you to explore, including our 4th International EPSIG Symposium on 29th October, which will feature Prof Ed Bullmore talking about depression and inflammation, and Prof Randy Nesse speaking about why anxiety is normal but usually useless (amongst others).

We have also been very impressed with the standard of the Charles Darwin Essay entries and will be announcing the two winners (for core trainees and specialty trainees respectively) at the conference. You are in for a treat, as we will be publishing the two winner and two runner-up essays in future newsletters.

Finally, please take the time to read Dr Steve Heigham's explanation of why young people are so distressed. He makes a cogent argument from a cultural evolutionary perspective which is well worth pondering. Enjoy!

2. Update on meetings

2.1 29th October 2021: 4th International EPSIG Symposium

We are delighted to invite you to the (virtual) 4th International EPSIG symposium and are sure you will agree we have a fantastic line-up:

- Maternal negativity and child maltreatment: How evolutionary perspectives might contribute to a more layered and compassionate understanding *by Dr Daniela Sieff*
- Preventive Evolutionary Psychiatry: Cross-Cultural Studies *by Dr Gul Deniz Salali*
- Inflammation and Depression *by Prof Edward Bullmore*
- Sex-Differences in Child and Adolescent Psychopathology: A Test of Evolutionary Hypotheses *by Prof Jonathan Hill*
- An Evolutionary Approach to Compassion: Understanding, Misunderstanding and Therapeutic Uses *by Prof Paul Gilbert*
- Why anxiety is usually normal but useless: Clinically crucial knowledge *by Prof Randolph Nesse*

Please book at https://events.rcpsych.ac.uk/evolutionary-sig-annual-conference-2021. We hope to see you all!

2.2 Free Webinar Program by the World Psychiatric Association (WPA) Section of Evolutionary Psychiatry


The Section of Evolutionary Psychiatry at the WPA will be running free webinars bi-monthly via the zoom platform starting November 2021. The topics covered will be of interest to all mental health professionals with an interest in the application of evolutionary thinking to the understanding of mental disorder and human psychology generally. The webinars will be delivered by eminent academics from across the world. Early registration is advisable.

- **24/11/2021** 4pm GMT 'Evolutionary Perspectives on Combat Stress: A Comparison of American Veterans and Turkana Warriors' by Matt Zefferman, Assistant Professor at Naval Postgraduate School, Monterey, California, USA
  https://uzh.zoom.us/meeting/register/u5AvdumsqjsqHdB2ed9vNK9wYqMIsMJV9Wyp
- **27/1/2022** 4pm GMT 'Friendship and Social Relationships: Understanding the Power of Our Most Important Relationships' by Robin Dunbar, Emeritus Professor, Oxford University, UK
  https://uzh.zoom.us/meeting/register/u5Ipf-yhqTkiGdGevqvmMEOFZG0mwDIXpmea

- **31/3/2022** 4pm BST 'The Application of Evolutionary Thinking in Clinical Settings' by Henry O'Connell, Adjunct Associate Clinical Professor, University of Limerick, Ireland https://uzh.zoom.us/meeting/register/u5wtf-mspj0rG9dJ3_12d7pDCpNyWcnyS2FJ
- **26/5/2022** 4pm BST 'Why Relationships Exist: Evolutionary Foundations for Psychotherapy' by Randolph Nesse, Professor of Life Sciences, and Former (Founding) Director, Center for Evolution and Medicine, Arizona State University, USA https://uzh.zoom.us/meeting/register/u5YlceGtrT0qH9y90TflMhivF6D5bPm3h0Fq

2.3 A further free webinar program with evolutionary content that would be of interest to EPSIG members is organised jointly by the 'Centre for the Dynamics of Social Complexity' and the University of Exeter on the theme of: 'Evolution and Social Systems'. Further information on the content, time and date of the webinars, speakers and registration links can be found on: http://www.dysoc.org/ess_webinars

3. A cultural evolutionary perspective on young people's pressing concerns in the Western World, *by Dr Steve Heigham*
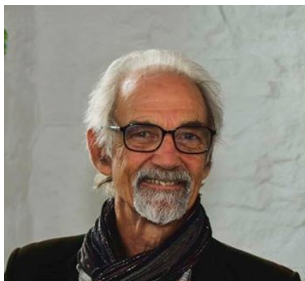
Steve Heigham is a psychotherapist in private practice and a lecturer in counselling at University College Weston. He is a member, and ex-chair of the BPS Psychotherapy Section. His research interests are in evolutionary, community and climate change psychology.

In my experience of therapy and teaching, I find that many people younger than 30 in the western world are quite alarmed and confused by a number of social trends that they have seen getting worse, e.g.: poverty amongst working families, housing costs rising, job insecurity, increasing mental health difficulties, populist far right movements, climate change, racial inequality and conflict, just to name a few.

Even though the press, politicians and other social commentators work these up into sensationalist whirlwinds from time to time, they seldom give any depth of background explanation to these trends. They never really explain how, even though the western economies still seem to be the largest in the world, young people here are paid less, in deeper debt, and less able to get reasonably priced accommodation than people were a generation ago. And because the origins of the current situation for young people in the

western world are so seldom explained in a straightforward way, and yet they see the older adults around seeming to accept the situation without question, this adds to their confusion. I consider that taking a longer term, **cultural evolutionary approach**, can help to explain this situation in reasonably objective terms, and reveal an underlying build-up of complexity in our relationship with the natural world that makes life both more comprehensible and predictable.

Jared Diamond started the explanation 20 years ago, showing how the high-density settlements that developed after the advent of agriculture (for us, in the middle east) spread slowly east and west across the temperate world over time. It spread in this way because it was in these latitudes that the domesticated plants and animals could adapt and survive; thus, the early civilisations were Chinese, Indian, Egyptian, Greek, and Roman, who all developed sophisticated cities and empires over thousands of years. Cultural evolutionary studies tend to focus on how, as populations moved from hunting and gathering into settled civilisations, people increasingly developed and lived by group social norms of more pro-social behaviour as population densities built up. These social norms acted as a selection pressures as more peaceable personality traits were preferred for mate selection and increasing status in the community/group. This mechanism of preferred traits amplified **social norms** that were about relating to each other: justice, marriage, property ownership and heredity, exchange and trade and communal cooperative endeavours (Henrich 2017).

The ensuing problems of power and excessive population density have since then generally been solved through two ways: warfare between competing groups, introducing selection pressure on strongly culturally constructed group values of group loyalty and solidarity; and group migrations, generally also pursued with warfare. These constitute most of the narrative of written history, on all continents (Turchin, 2016), and have strongly influenced the development of very complex technologies.

In Europe, after the fall of the Roman Empire, the western tribes began a different and separate trajectory from other parts of the world. This happened particularly from around about a thousand years ago, by which time the populations were mostly Christian. This distinct trajectory was very largely down to powerful cultural evolutionary forces unleashed by church policies that led to the breakup of the tribal structures and tight kinship networks, through the severe limits placed on extended kinship obligations and the strict prohibitions on cousin marriages that widened progressively over time (Henrich, 2020). The unintended consequences of these policies included the rise of a culture of **individualism** through a focus on encouraging nuclear, monogamous family households, closely monitored by church attendance. This, paradoxically, led to greater social cohesiveness through the rise of guilds and other associations, but with far more individualised social norms of behaviour within these communities. This trend had increasing effects on the psychological development of the populations over centuries particularly in terms of greater cognitive control of the

emotions and social behaviour, through greater personal responsibility and self-regulation/discipline and a greater willingness to cooperate with strangers (Foucault 1971; Henrich, 2020; Pinker 2011).

This individualistic interpretation of morality also further led to the splitting off of the protestant church from the Catholic, which further influenced nations which significantly embraced Protestantism towards greater social mobility, in terms of literacy, book publishing, guilds of skilled trades, university learning and ethics of personal moral development. Thus, particularly northern and western nations in Europe were then predisposed to emphasise economic development and personal development/salvation, with an emphasis on competition and success through individual hard work and devotion to God. This led on, two hundred years ago, to the era of meteoric economic rise through industrialisation, based on manufacture of machinery and consumer goods, building on the trade relationships, technology and learning of the previous 300 years. Particularly the advances in transport technology enabled the European countries to **colonise territories** for raw materials and slave labour as well as create markets for manufactured goods. Over a couple of hundred years or so, this created the complex social norms we see today, of working in external workplaces, selling through impersonal markets, investing through complex financial capital arrangements and voting for centralised democratic governments (Henrich 2020).

What is less talked about in our shared published history however, is how the west then went through a tempestuous re-orientation of these arrangements during the **late 1970's.** Essentially, at that time, the western economies went increasingly broke – they were no longer able to produce material wealth through leading the world in manufacture and technological development, and other developing nations, e.g.: Japan, Hong Kong, Taiwan were able to do it cheaper and more efficiently, with sweat shop labour more readily available and better access to the raw materials. The western colonies in Africa, the Middle East and Asia, where much of the raw materials were located, had become independent in the 1960s and were no longer open to plunder by the imperial nations of Europe, and could sell on the open market. This problematic **crisis of capitalism** led to many attempted solutions, and, as with many developments that happen as culture evolves, the ways that the economic and social problems have attempted to be solved often produce even more complex problems later.

Thus, it was, that out of this crisis **Neo-liberalist capitalist economic theory** sprang and was preferred, seeming to offer a way in which the west could continue to be fully involved, and lead, in the global economy, based on the liberalisation of capital movements to encourage production wherever labour costs were cheap. It also emphasised that individuals in the west should become more entrepreneurial and business-like about every aspect of their lives, and less shackled by collective social norms such as trade unionism, community obligations and bureaucratic regulation. Overall, this has led to a huge increase in economic

activity across the world, and billions of people have been raised out of absolute poverty where these trends in social norms have also been increasingly adopted across the world. Most countries are now designated as 'middle income' countries (rather than third world as they used to be) and have a growing middle class which is attracted to western consumerist lifestyles and developing increasing rates of inequality.

However, it has also led to various other **unintended consequences**, particularly in the west. At the time of its inception, neo-liberalist theory promised growth in the financial industries, service sector, building and property markets, leisure and health industries, IT sector, energy industries, media etc. At the time there was little consideration about whether these types of employment, and consumer led 'symptoms' of increasing affluence, were sustainable in the long term. However, since then, what has happened is that much of the growth in wealth, particularly in the US and in the UK, has in fact been greatly bolstered by increasing household and government debt, steady increase of property value, offshore accumulation of oligarchic fortunes, uncontrolled increases in shareholder profits and bonuses in privatised services, and monetarisation of social media through the development of advertising in the 'attention economy'. During this period, people's outlook has also gravitated towards **'post-modernist' values** of increasing individualism: self as project, consumption as personal statement, emphasis on independence and freedom etc. This has been swelled by the advertising industry and media overfocusing on celebrity culture, which reinforces the impression that anyone can achieve what they dream of.

It is only recently that **this cultural trend in the west has come face to face with the fact that if this individualistic interpretation of the purpose and meaning of life were adopted by every individual person on the planet, we simply do not have the resources to fulfil this**. And in trying to do so, we will unbalance earth's ecosystem so badly it would never recover, and most life forms would become extinct. This could be considered as an **evolutionary crisis for mankind**, where our evolved capabilities and motivations still very much drive us towards individual goals of wellbeing, comfort and security for ourselves and our immediate family, but overall head us towards corporate disaster.

Over the last 20 years, several researchers have begun to show how we have evolved certain personality traits and cognitive biases through our long evolutionary history, and how more recent cultural developments have produced the experience **of psychological mismatch, or dissonance**. This conflict has most often been posed as being between how we have tended to live out our basic life goals over many millennium, focussing on our family and locality, and the current situation where our cognitive and emotional functioning is increasingly influenced by external (mostly economic and digital) pressures to decide and act rapidly and impulsively, at a global, highly interconnected level.

This makes life more complex and difficult to navigate for everyone, especially young people, to whom it can also be seen as a clash of social norms – older generations still depending on the norms of hard work and striving, but **younger people seeing the bigger**

picture of a possibly 'uninhabitable Earth' through over-production (Wallace-Wells 2019). This conflict can be seen in opinion surveys, where, according to the UNDP, young people are more likely (70%) to believe climate change is a global emergency than other age groups. It is interesting that a substantial majority (58%) of older people also agreed with them (UNDP 2021), but don't see the need for such immediate action.

Another important line of research shows that **increasing inequalities** between and within nations themselves tend to produce more mental health difficulties (Marmot 2010) such as depression and anxiety about the future, at both a personal and communal level. This factor has also been accelerated by a decade of austerity measures that were implemented after the financial crash (2008-9), where no corporations or individuals were made to answer for the misdemeanours, which then produced an increasing atmosphere of unfairness and distrust (Harris 2015). In particular, services for young people – sure start centres, youth clubs, CAMHS teams, free after school clubs, have simply been cut, and only those with enough money (middle classes) have then been able to buy such services privately, again increasing levels of inequality, and emphasising individualism. And yet, throughout this turbulent period, educational institutes in the west have still been ratcheting up the pressure on young people to compete educationally, with the promise that this will lead to successful careers in new businesses.

One could say that this youngest generation in the west are the victims of our success story. We are still successful, if measured by slightly increasing GDPs, but yet we have seen a year on year rise in anxiety and depression amongst millennials (MIND 2019). This is seldom overtly connected in the mainstream press to the social conditions that have developed over the last several hundred years, particularly in the UK and US, which have developed the most individualist and competitive cultures (Wilkinson and Pickett 2016), but instead it is often blamed on the social media, the parents, or young people themselves – sometimes referred to as 'snowflakes', i.e.: overly pampered.

Looked at from this longer term perspective, it is perhaps no great surprise that the current young generation are sometimes confused and angered by the world they see around them: 200 years of apparent growth and increasing affluence in the west have given them, (as well as the older generations), the expectations of this continuing, with each new generation expecting more security, comfort and convenience. But the actual experience of the millennial and later generations is, increasingly, of over-priced accommodation and subservient precarious service and distributive industry jobs that don't value the people who fulfil the cursory roles that they need filled. To add to that, they now have background anxiety about climate change, ecological crisis, increasing migration, and most recently, a lethal global pandemic that may be only the first of many still to come.

And yet still the pressure to conform, compete and succeed has been emphasised over the wish to collaborate and survive. Many young people feel that their perspective on the world isn't being listened to, catered for, and represented in the present political and media

set up, which instead presents a narrative of business carrying on as usual being what most people in society want. This could be said to be particularly acute over the most recent issues of Brexit and climate change, both of which will affect them far more than the older generations that have caused them.

It can be seen, from this point of view, as understandable that many young people are now making their feelings known more publicly through social media, school strikes and civil disobedience, particularly around climate change and increased police authoritarianism. Perhaps this is the most assertive and therapeutic thing that young people can do; they have known the facts about climate change all their lives, but have seen governments, and the adults around them, do little or nothing to mitigate the effects it will have. Perhaps it does more for their mental health than ruminating individually on their anxiety and depression to join in with others in a common cause. Only time will tell how effective their protests are in shaping how we, as a society, will respond to the problems that we have accumulated and the crisis that we have reached.

References:

Diamond, J. (1997). Guns, germs and steel.
Henrich, J. (2016). The secret of our success.
Turchin, P. (2016) Ultra Society.
Henrich, J. (2020). The Weirdest people in the world.
Foucault, M. (1971). Madness and civilisation.
Pinker,S.(2011). The better angels of our nature.
Wallace-Wells, D. (2019). The uninhabitable earth.
UNDP and Oxford University, (2021). Peoples Climate Vote (Results).
Marmot, M. (2010). The Marmot report
Harris, C. (2014). The impact of austerity on a British council estate. The psychologist.
Wilkinson, R. & Pickett, K. (2016) Spirit level.
MIND, (2019). Three in five young people have experienced a mental health problem or are close to someone who has.

****

Many thanks for reading the Newsletter and please don't hesitate to get in touch with any contributions or suggestions.