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What Evolutionary Anthropologists Can Do for Public Health—and How You Can Get Involved

Bria Dunham

Integrating biocultural and evolutionary insights into public health practice can produce more effective interventions. Doubt me? Scholars working within evolutionary medicine and ethnopediatrics have already illuminated such connections in host-parasite coevolution, reproductive physiology and child-rearing practices. These have translated into different ways of thinking about vector control, maternity care and facilitating infant sleep. Further integrations of evolutionary principles within public health are ripe for the forging.

Public health aims to improve the health of populations, but often operates at the proximate level and lacks an evolutionary perspective. Evolutionary anthropology in general, and human behavioral ecology (HBE) in particular, have key insights to contribute to public health, which emerge from their shared interest in the intersection of human culture and biology. Most current applications of evolutionary thinking in public health address infectious disease epidemiology, including attention to the rise of antibiotic-resistant bacteria and a consideration of the co-evolution of pathogens and hosts. However, HBE can help inform public health about other components of health and illness, emerging from HBE's close attention to social relationships and their implications for health outcomes. Evolutionary anthropology's empiricism is highly compatible with the health sciences, and the cultural consonance of global health programs is enhanced by the sustained community engagement and ethnographic contextualization that are hallmarks of HBE.

Many classic lines of inquiry in HBE can advance the connections between evolutionary anthropology and public health, from research on cultural transmission to risk-pooling and food-sharing to parent–offspring conflict. Some current major projects integrating the tools of HBE within a public health framework include the Tsimané Health and Life History Project (associated with Hillard Kaplan of U New Mexico and Michael Gurven of UC–Santa Barbara, among others) and the Aché health, maternity, and life history research program (associated with Magdalena Hurtado and Kim Hill of Arizona State U, among others). These projects underscore that the existing scholarship integrating the fields is largely conducted by evolutionary anthropologists addressing public health, and not by public health professionals using the tools of behavioral ecology. While these long-standing programs valuably contribute to the fields of HBE and public health, new opportunities also loom for scholars to integrate these approaches.

Outside the academy, HBE can influence policy and practice through intersecting with the work of multilateral and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) on topics related to health and development. HBE has become a critical tool in combating human trafficking and slavery in Southeast Asia, one of the most trafficking-dense regions of the world. Lisa Rende Taylor, Chief Technical Advisor for the United Nations, explains:

> A decade ago, the UN and NGOs assumed that the people most at risk of being trafficked were the poor and uneducated; subsequently, millions of dollars of development funds were poured into outreach and awareness raising to poor communities. Obviously, not all poor people are trafficked, so HBE was applied to help hone our targeting of high-risk behaviors and populations. HBE has been used to revolutionize the way anti-human trafficking responders understand trafficking risk, in terms of parental decision-making as well as risky decision-making. Incorporating rigorous anthropological field methods into development programming more generally has also raised the bar on the quality of research methods and ethics in development, a very important contribution to fields working with vulnerable populations.

How can we continue to infuse more behavioral ecology into global public health research, policy and practice? The necessary first step would be to cultivate among evolutionary scholars an awareness of and openness to the applied value of findings in HBE. Secondly, we can encourage cross-training at the graduate level where desirable and compatible with the career trajectory of students from both approaches. Furthermore, we can seek out opportunities for collaborative interdisciplinary research involving public health scholars and professionals, both inside and beyond conventional academic channels. Finally, human behavioral ecologists can engage with public health professional organizations and institutions to better disseminate our findings to those who are in the best position to put

them into practice.

At times evolutionary anthropologists have shied away from the applied implications of our work, which is perhaps understandable given the controversies of the past and the tensions between science and activism. In recent years, however, increased interest in public anthropology has expanded the visibility of applied anthropological projects and thus their potential impact. Evolutionary anthropologists with interests in health could make good use of that opportunity.

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Comments on and contributions to this column are welcome. Please send to contributing editor ***Adam H Boyette*** *(ahboyette@gmail.com). Columns are archived at www.evanthsoc.org.*

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