

Parallel Session 14: Science in daily press: a cultural question?

**POPULAR EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY AS PUBLIC SCIENCE
AND BOUNDARY WORK**

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Abstract

The paper presents findings of a study of the new subject of evolutionary psychology as it appeared in the public domain of the UK in the 1990s. Quantitative and qualitative analyses, alongside research interviews, found that UK broadsheet press coverage of the subject rose throughout the 1990s and peaked in the year 2000, was associated with coverage of popular science books on the subject, and was written by unusual numbers of academics and book authors. I argue that this evidence, alongside material from research interviews, suggests that popular evolutionary psychology is an example of Bucchi's (1996) model of a 'deviation' route in the communication of science, where scientists have used the public domain as a forum to make arguments and reach audiences unavailable through routine forms of academic communication.

Key words: popular science

Text

Background/Methods

Evolutionary psychology (EP) is a new area of research which first appeared in the public domain of the UK media during 1994 and in academic citations in 1989. Evolutionary psychologists, stress the importance looking to our evolutionary origins in understanding modern human psychology, behaviour and cultures. During the mid and late 1990s, the public claims made by evolutionary psychologists were extensively debated on a popular level in the UK, particularly through the publication of many popular science books on the subject, and by the appearance of many academics in the mass media discussing the issues raised by such claims. In this coverage, evolutionary psychology claims were often closely related to discussions of sexual politics, gender difference, and changes in workplace and family roles in recent years.

This paper presents research following the UK press and other media coverage of evolutionary psychology from 1990 until 2002. Press coverage of EP was analysed through searches of electronic archives of broadsheet newspapers, both quantitatively, through content analysis, and qualitatively alongside coverage

from other media and interviews with academics and media professionals. In particular, press coverage of evolutionary psychology was compared directly with that of a related subject in science (articles containing 'evolved + genetic') and a related word in more general use ('Darwinian') over the same period.

Key Findings

- UK press coverage peaked in 2000 and subsequently dropped away strongly: academic citations were broadly in line with press coverage until this date, whereupon they continued to rise (Figure 1).
- Press coverage of EP was closely associated with that for particular authors around dates of publication, e.g. Robert Wright's (1995) *The Moral Animal: the New Science of Evolutionary Psychology* (Figure 2).
- 'Evolutionary psychology' newspaper articles were authored by more academics/book authors compared to coverage of 'evolved + genetic' and 'Darwinian'. They were also less often written by science journalists than 'evolved + genetic' articles were (Figure 3).
- [Darwin@LSE](#) group, from the London School of Economics philosophy of science department, organised a series of public seminars on evolutionary themes 1995-98. EP academics and authors were invited to speak at these; co-ordination with publishers on publicity; very well attended and covered by media. Interviewees were unanimous that [Darwin@LSE](#) played a central role in creating awareness of EP in the UK public domain.
- Strong evidence of interdisciplinary friction around EP arguments: e.g. evolutionary psychologists' rhetorical attacks on the 'Standard Social Science Model' (approaches that 'ignore' the role of evolution); arguments against EP often came from sociologists/other psychologists, but also from several biologists. Participants in the debate frequently represented one another as 'unscientific'.

Conclusions

This study illustrates well the way in which different parts of the UK media can co-ordinate and set one another's agendas in their coverage of a science like evolutionary psychology, which has little relevance to wider news agendas. In particular, it provides strong evidence of the importance of the 1990s 'popular science' boom in publishing for setting the agenda in other media such as the daily press.

I would argue that the evidence presented here is consistent with Massimiano Bucchi's (1996) model of 'deviation processes' in science communication. Bucchi argues that in such cases, scientists appeal to the public domain, frequently working the media themselves, in order to make arguments that cannot be aired via everyday academic communication routes such as journal articles, or to reach audiences outside of their own discipline. Bucchi argues that such episodes are often associated with contest over, or the definition of, disciplinary boundaries in science, and cites examples such as controversy over the asteroid impact hypothesis of the extinction of the dinosaurs.

In the case of popular EP in the UK during the 1990s, a new approach to the evolutionary study of humans sought to distance itself from previous approaches such as Sociobiology, from a marginalised position within the social sciences. Books such as Robert Wright's *The Moral Animal* created awareness of 'the new science' in the public domain, not only through the books themselves, but also through associated coverage in other media, and through the activities of academics and authors themselves to create such coverage, for example by writing book reviews and other articles in the national press. Such moves were then reflected by other academics arguing against evolutionary psychology claims in a similar pattern of popular books and articles. Importantly, my research also suggests that this kind of science 'popularisation' can have important effects in academia itself, adding further supporting evidence for interactionist, rather than dissemination models of science communication.

References

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- Wright, Robert (1994) *The Moral Animal: Evolutionary Psychology and Everyday Life / Why We Are the Way We Are: The New Science of Evolutionary Psychology*. New York: Pantheon; London: Little, Brown (1995)

Figures

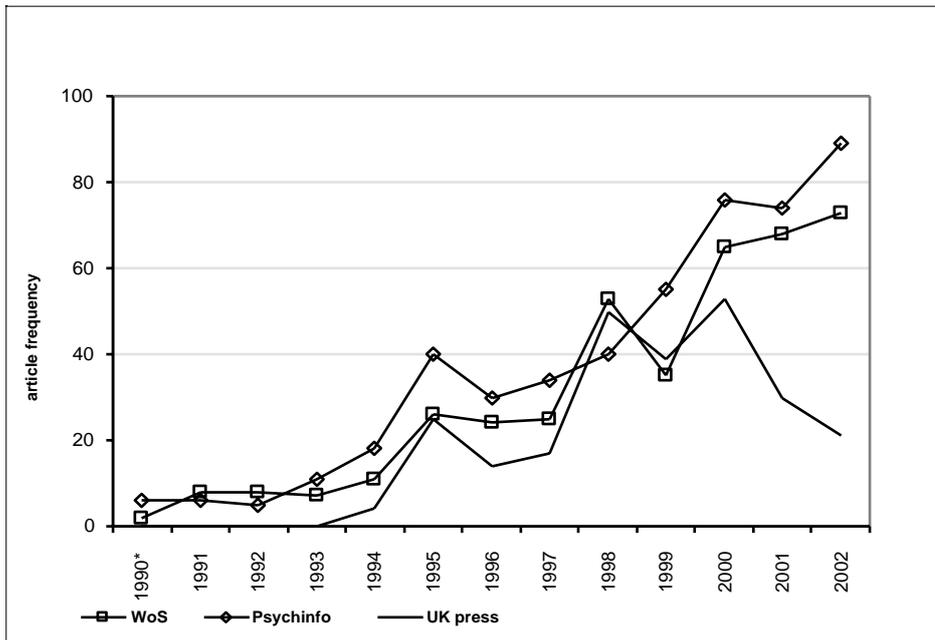


Figure 1: Frequencies of EP articles: academic citation databases; UK broadsheet press

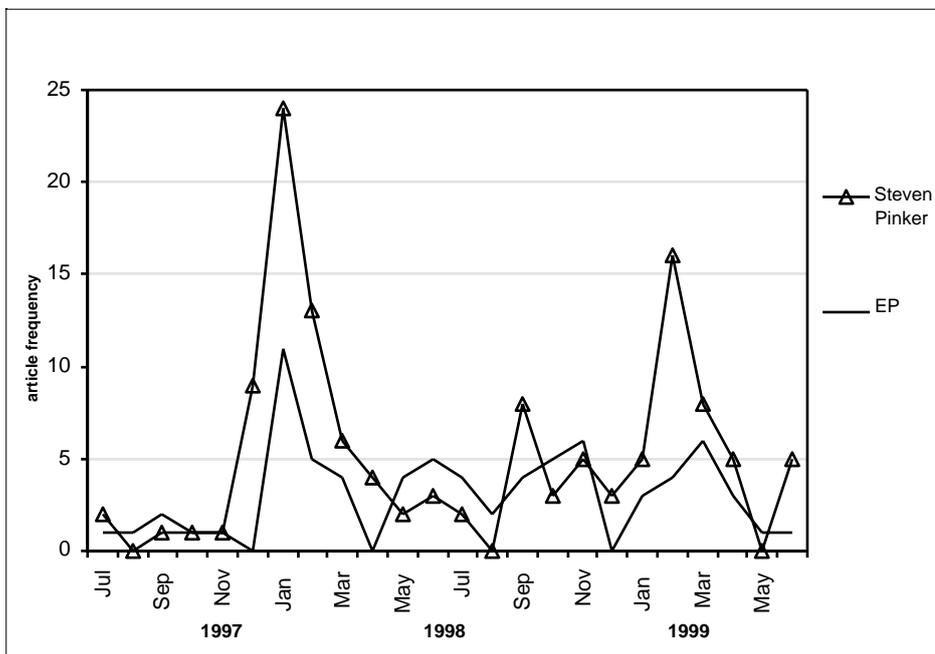


Figure 2: Frequencies of EP press articles; psychologist / author Steven Pinker

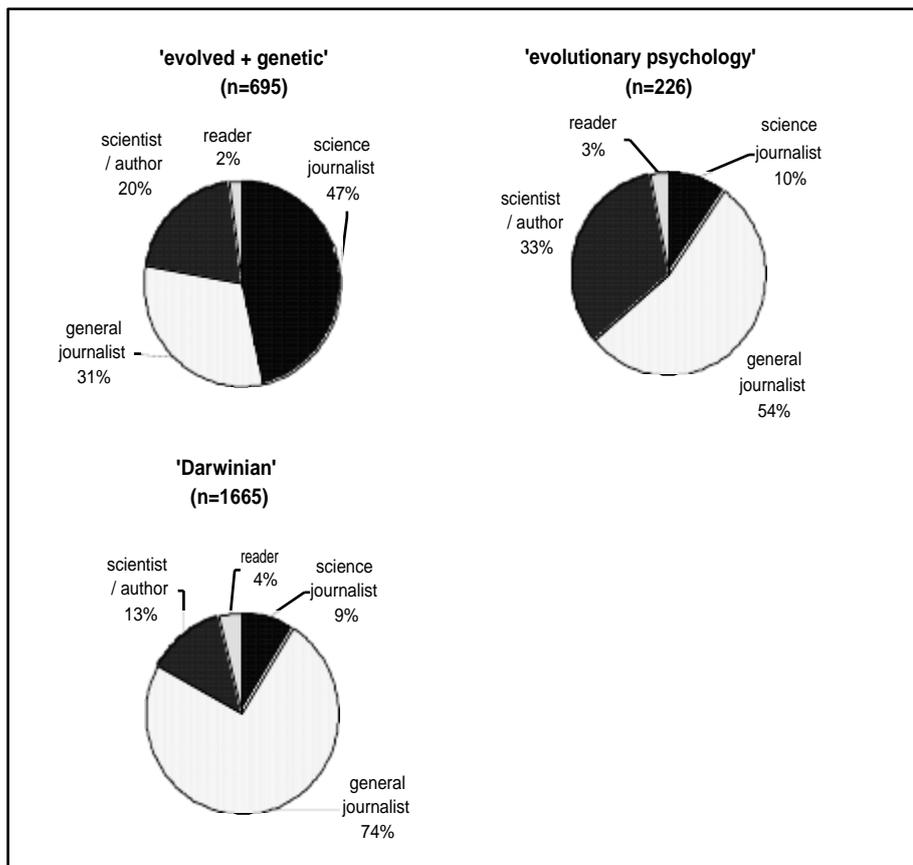


Figure 3: Comparisons of article authors 1990-2001

