5-2020

Douglas Kenrick

Norman P. LI
Singapore Management University, normanli@smu.edu.sg

Douglas Kenrick

Norman P. Li, Singapore Management University

Published in Encyclopedia of evolutionary psychological science, 2020, Springer.

DOI: 10.1007/978-3-319-16999-6_642-1

Synonyms

Psychologist; Social psychologist; Evolutionary psychologist; Author; Researcher

Definition

Douglas Kenrick is a president's professor of social psychology at Arizona State University (ASU). He received a BA in psychology from Dowling College (1970) and a PhD (1976) in social psychology from Arizona State University under the tutelage of Robert Cialdini. Kenrick then served as an assistant professor of psychology at Montana State University before coming back to ASU. In 2018–2019, Kenrick served as president of the Human Behavior and Evolution Society. He has authored over 200 highly cited academic articles, 2 textbooks, and 2 popular books – Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life (2011) and The Rational Animal (2013, with Vlad Griskevicius) – as well as numerous edited volumes and invited book chapters. He is well known among colleagues, students, collaborators, and anyone who has attended any of his talks, as being extremely insightful and funny. His wit and guts are undisputedly unmatched by any academic. In a now-legendary 2000 Human Behavior and Evolution Society plenary presentation, Kenrick delivered the entire 45-min talk in a deeply-southern Baptist preacher's accent and left a standing-room-only audience rolling with laughter in their seats and in the auditorium aisles.

Introduction

A favorite Kenrick quote is from Oscar Wilde, "We are all in the gutter but some of us are looking at the stars." A glimpse of his past indicates how a particular fondness for this quote may have come about. Douglas Kenrick was born in Queens, New York, into a family and environment hardly befitting to a future eminent scholar. As Kenrick openly recounts, his friends were switchblade-carrying greasers, and his father and brother both rightfully earned places in Sing Sing maximum security prison. Kenrick himself avoided life imprisonment by keeping in check his fantasies about killing his stepfather (but later used insights gained from this experience to investigate homicidal fantasies; Kenrick and Sheets 1993). He was, though, expelled from two high schools and put on academic probation at a community college. Somehow, in the midst of this unpromising life path, Kenrick developed a determination to break from family tradition and environmental influences and developed a keen interest in academics.

In this entry, we cover some of the many areas in which Kenrick has contributed important insights.

Personality

In his earlier work, Kenrick published an influential paper addressing a major debate on personality and the situation and how personality traits do actually meaningfully predict behavior (Kenrick and Funder 1988). Another paper challenged the presumption that personality traits were weak predictors of behavior, by

showing that traits which people rated high in self-rated observability and consistency yielded high agreement among self, parent, and peer ratings (Kenrick and Stringfield 1980).

Age Preferences

Together with former graduate school classmate Richard Keefe, Kenrick published several papers detailing people's minimum and maximum age preferences as indicated in their personal advertisements (Kenrick and Keefe 1992). They found that while women of all ages tend to look for mates at their own age or up to a few years older, men tended to want mates who are increasingly younger compared to their own age. Marriage statistics, as Kenrick found, fit this pattern quite nicely. Of particular note, teenage boys found women older than them to be most attractive, despite that those women did not have any interest in them (Kenrick et al. 1996). This finding countered the sociocultural notion that age preferences reflect men wanting to control women and younger women are simply easier to control. Instead, the entire pattern of findings on age preferences was consistent with an evolutionary psychological explanation that sex differences in age preferences reflect males having evolved to value female fertility and reproductive value, which peaks at age 23, and females having evolved to value men's social status and resources, of which older men have more.

Mate Preferences

Aside from age preferences, Kenrick has also investigated mate preferences for other traits, finding support for an important qualification on applying parental investment theory to humans. Using a minimum percentile preference paradigm, Kenrick investigated mate preferences across various types of relationship durations (Kenrick et al. 1990, 1993). Of particular note, he found that while men and women tend to have similarly high minimum requirements across various types of relationships for traits like intelligence, they differ sharply when the relationship is purely sexual. That is, while women retain their high standards, men relax their standards considerably. As Kenrick pointed out, this sex difference reflects minimum differences in obligatory parental investment (Trivers 1972), where women but not men bear potential costs of pregnancy so women have evolved to be more selective and cautious than men for casual sexual partners. However, when men and women have evolved to invest similarly high as in committed, long-term relationships, both sexes are equally selective about their partners.

Another interesting and relevant line of work featured contrast effects. That is, when men view pictures of attractive, naked women – as in Playboy, Penthouse, or Hustler centerfolds – they subsequently find normal people and their own mates to be unattractive (Kenrick et al. 1989). Importantly, such effects are not limited to nude erotica, and the implications extend beyond high school boys giving lower ratings to their peers or wife. In a series of insightful follow-up studies, Kenrick and colleagues found that when exposed to facial photos of attractive women, women feel worse about their own mate value, and men feel less committed to their current partners. Similarly, when exposed to descriptions of socially dominant men, men feel worse about their own mate value, and women feel less committed to their current partners (Kenrick et al. 1994; Guttieres et al. 1999).

Together, these findings support the idea that people's view of themselves, their mating standards, and their relationship commitment, are indexed on – and can be sabotaged by – the perceived value of people in their environment. Furthermore, what constitutes value is sex-differentiated according to what traits are most adaptively beneficial to have in oneself as well as in one's partner. While this process would have been adaptive in the ancestral environment where anyone that one encountered was an actual potential mate or competitor, in the modern world, it leads to problems. Specifically, we now encounter thousands of still or moving images of beautiful models and individuals. As if that's not enough to make us feel really bad about ourselves and our mates, technology now allows photos to be instantly beautified, thereby intensifying the effects of our automatic social comparison mechanisms (Yong et al. 2017).

In yet another line of work on mate preferences, Kenrick and Li solved a paradox in the literature. Evolutionary theorists have argued that physical attractiveness is a cue to female fertility and that a man's social status is a cue to his ability to provide resources critical for offspring survival (e.g., Buss 1989; Symons 1979). Without these traits, reproduction and offspring survival in an ancestral environment are not possible, respectively. Yet, although empirical work shows sex differences in the predicted directions for mate preferences regarding physical attractiveness and social status, numerous mate preference surveys indicate that these traits are not considered to be particularly important. To resolve this paradox, Kenrick and Li introduced a budget allocation methodology to constrain people's selection of traits (Li et al. 2002; Li and Kenrick 2006). When budgets are low and choices are highly constrained, men prioritized physical attractiveness above other traits, and women prioritized social status above other traits for long-term mates. However, when budgets were higher and choices were less constrained, men and women favored other traits. Thus, for long-term mates, men regard physical attractiveness as a necessity, and women regard social status as a necessity. Other traits are considered luxuries – they are important only after necessities can be obtained in sufficient quality.

Dynamical, Complex Systems

Kenrick's foray into dynamical systems reflects his unique ability to see connections at the big-picture level and the courage to go forward with one's convictions. Kenrick uniquely saw how evolutionary psychology, social psychology, and dynamical systems (complexity theory) could be meaningfully combined. At the time, many individuals doubted these ideas. But Kenrick persisted, and these ideas were endorsed by founders of evolutionary psychology at the 1999 HBES conference and made for a highly cited Psychological Review paper (Kenrick's second at this very top journal; Kenrick et al. 2003). The article theorized and demonstrated through simulations that many of the social patterns found at the group level stem from individuals following simple decision rules but interacting with other individuals using the same decision rules. The decision rules are subject to laws of natural selection and process as input the social environment. In turn, the evolved decision rules and how they play out in this space influences the group-level patterns that emerge in the social environment.

Fundamental Motives

In that Psychological Review paper (Kenrick et al. 2003), Kenrick identified six major social domains that characterize human life and broadly represent what humans evolved to do: coalition formation, social status, self-protection, mate choice, relationship maintenance, and parental care. Across several papers published with various former students including Joshua Ackerman, Vaughn Becker, Jessica Li, Jon Maner, Jill Sundie, and Vladas Griskevicius, Kenrick examined how activating fundamental motives like mating can influence a host of decisions in seemingly unrelated areas such as conspicuous consumption (Griskevicius et al. 2007; Sundie et al. 2011), conformity (Griskevicius et al. 2006b), creativity (Griskevicius et al. 2006a), economic decisions (Li et al. 2012), facial recognition (Ackerman et al. 2006), interpersonal perception (Maner et al. 2005), and threat perception (Becker et al. 2010). Much of this work is summarized in one of Kenrick's popular books, The Rational Animal: How Evolution Made Us Smarter Than We Think (Kenrick and Griskevicius 2013).

More recently, Kenrick took on the ambitious task of rewriting Maslow's hierarchy of needs from an evolutionary perspective (Kenrick et al. 2010). In this highly cited and controversial work, Kenrick replaced the original need levels with fundamental motives, arguing that parenting, not self-actualization, occupies the very top level.

Conclusion

Douglas Kenrick started out on a path leading nowhere at best and death row at worst. Yet, he went on to become a one of the most influential social psychologists and evolutionary psychologists. On this journey from the gutter to academic stardom, Kenrick has published many important works, leading the world in providing interesting and important big ideas and insights into human behavior and human nature. This entry has covered some of the major areas that Kenrick has examined, but there are many other important papers and topics not mentioned here. Much of Kenrick's work and the surrounding background and inspiration for the work can be found in Kenrick's book Sex, Murder, and the Meaning of Life (Kenrick 2011). Just as importantly, Kenrick has induced countless individuals to laugh out loud along the way, whether in papers (e.g., Kenrick 1995), academic talks (e.g., Kenrick 2000) and speaker introductions (Kenrick 1994), or office meetings. At this point, the learned world awaits Kenrick's next big idea as well as his next stand-up routine. In the meantime, readers can tune into Kenrick's insightfully entertaining blog at Psychology Today. Here is one to check out: www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/sex-murder-and-the-meaning-life/200912/how-the-dawkins-stole-christmas.

References

Ackerman, J. M., Shapiro, J. R., Neuberg, S. L., Kenrick, D. T., Becker, D. V., Griskevicius, V., Maner, J. K., & Schaller, M. (2006). They all look the same to me (unless they're angry): From out-group homogeneity to out-group heterogeneity. Psychological Science, 17(10), 836–840. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.2006.01790.x.

Becker, D. V., Anderson, U. S., Neuberg, S. L., Maner, J. K., Shapiro, J. R., Ackerman, J. M., Schaller, M., & Kenrick, D. T. (2010). More memory bang for the attentional Buck: Self-protection goals enhance encoding efficiency for potentially threatening males. Social Psychological and Personality Science, 1(2), 182–189. https://doi.org/10.1177/1948550609359202.

Buss, D. (1989). Sex differences in human mate preferences: Evolutionary hypotheses tested in 37 cultures. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 12, 1–14. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00023992.

Griskevicius, V., Cialdini, R. B., & Kenrick, D. T. (2006a). Peacocks, Picasso, and parental investment: The effects of romantic motives on creativity. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91(1), 63–76. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.1.63.

Griskevicius, V., Goldstein, N. J., Mortensen, C. R., Cialdini, R. B., & Kenrick, D. T. (2006b). Going along versus going alone: When fundamental motives facilitate strategic (non)conformity. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 91(2), 281–294. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.91.2.281.

Griskevicius, V., Tybur, J. M., Sundie, J. M., Cialdini, R. B., Miller, G. F., & Kenrick, D. T. (2007). Blatant benevolence and conspicuous consumption: When romantic motives elicit strategic costly signals. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 93(1), 85–102. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.93.1.85.

Gutierres, S. E., Kenrick, D. T., & Partch, J. J. (1999). Beauty, dominance, and the mating game: Contrast effects in self-assessment reflect gender differences in mate selection. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 25(9), 1126–1134. https://doi.org/10.1177/01461672992512006.

Kenrick, D. T. (1994). Robert Cialdini. Speaker introduction given at the 30th annual meeting of the Society for experimental social psychology, Lake Tahoe.

Kenrick, D. T. (1995). Evolutionary theory versus the confederacy of dunces. Psychological Inquiry, 6(1), 56–62. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327965pli0601_10.

Kenrick, D. T. (2000). Can one ever be too wealthy or too chaste? Nonlinearities and the search for psychological mechanisms. Annual meeting of the Human behavior & evolution society. Amherst.

Kenrick, D. T. (2011). Sex, murder, and the meaning of life: A psychologist investigates how evolution, cognition, and complexity are revolutionizing our view of human nature. New York: Basic Books.

Kenrick, D. T., & Funder, D. C. (1988). Profiting from controversy: Lessons from the person-situation debate. American Psychologist, 43(1), 23–34. https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066x.43.1.23.CrossRefPubMedGoogle Scholar

Kenrick, D. T., & Griskevicius, V. (2013). The rational animal: How evolution made us smarter than we think. New York: Basic Books.

Kenrick, D. T., & Keefe, R. C. (1992). Age preferences in mates reflect sex differences in human reproductive strategies. Behavioral and Brain Sciences, 15(1), 75–91. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0140525X00067595.

Kenrick, D. T., & Sheets, V. (1993). Homicidal fantasies. Ethology and Sociobiology, 14(4), 231–246. https://doi.org/10.1016/0162-3095(93)90019-E.

Kenrick, D. T., & Stringfield, D. O. (1980). Personality traits and the eye of the beholder: Crossing some traditional philosophical boundaries in the search for consistency in all of the people. Psychological Review, 87(1), 88–104. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.87.1.88.

Kenrick, D. T., Gutierres, S. E., & Goldberg, L. L. (1989). Influence of popular erotica on judgments of strangers and mates. Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 25(2), 159–167. https://doi.org/10.1016/0022-1031(89)90010-3.

Kenrick, D. T., Sadalla, E. K., Groth, G., & Trost, M. R. (1990). Evolution, traits, and the stages of human courtship: Qualifying the parental investment model. Journal of Personality, 58(1), 97–116. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6494.1990.tb00909.x.

Kenrick, D. T., Groth, G. E., Trost, M. R., & Sadalla, E. K. (1993). Integrating evolutionary and social exchange perspectives on relationships: Effects of gender, self-appraisal, and involvement level on mate selection criteria. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 64(6), 951–969. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.64.6.951.

Kenrick, D. T., Neuberg, S. L., Zierk, K. L., & Krones, J. M. (1994). Evolution and social cognition: Contrast effects as a function of sex, dominance, and physical attractiveness. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 20(2), 210–217. https://doi.org/10.1177/0146167294202008.

Kenrick, D. T., Keefe, R. C., Gabrielidis, C., & Cornelius, J. S. (1996). Adolescents' age preferences for dating partners: Support for an evolutionary model of life-history strategies. Child Development, 67, 1499–1511. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8624.1996.tb01810.x.

Kenrick, D. T., Li, N. P., & Butner, J. (2003). Dynamical evolutionary psychology: Individual decision rules and emergent social norms. Psychological Review, 110, 3–28. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-295X.110.1.3.

Kenrick, D. T., Griskevicius, V., Neuberg, S. L., & Schaller, M. (2010). Renovating the pyramid of needs: Contemporary extensions built upon ancient foundations. Perspectives on Psychological Science, 5(3), 292–314. https://doi.org/10.1177/1745691610369469.

Li, N. P., & Kenrick, D. T. (2006). Sex similarities and differences in preferences for short-term mates: What, whether, and why. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 90(3), 468–489. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.90.3.468.

Li, N. P., Bailey, J. M., Kenrick, D. T., & Linsenmeier, J. A. W. (2002). The necessities and luxuries of mate preferences: Testing the tradeoffs. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82(6), 947–955. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.82.6.947.

Li, Y. J., Kenrick, D. T., Griskevicius, V., & Neuberg, S. L. (2012). Economic decision biases and fundamental motivations: How mating and self-protection alter loss aversion. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 102(3), 550–561. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0025844.

Maner, J. K., Kenrick, D. T., Becker, D. V., Robertson, T. E., Hofer, B., Neuberg, S. L., Delton, A. W., Butner, J., & Schaller, M. (2005). Functional projection: How fundamental social motives can bias interpersonal perception. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 88(1), 63–78. https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.88.1.63.

Sundie, J. M., Kenrick, D. T., Griskevicius, V., Tybur, J. M., Vohs, K. D., & Beal, D. J. (2011). Peacocks, Porsches, and Thorstein Veblen: Conspicuous consumption as a sexual signaling system. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 100(4), 664–680. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021669.

Symons, D. (1979). The evolution of human sexuality. New York: Oxford University Press.Google Scholar

Trivers, R. (1972). Parental investment and sexual selection. In Sexual selection & the descent of man (pp. 136–179). New York: Aldine de Gruyter. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315129266-7.

Yong, J. C., Li, N. P., Valentine, K. A., & Smith, A. R. (2017). Female virtual intrasexual competition and its consequences: An evolutionary mismatch perspective. In M. L. Fisher (Ed.), Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of women and competition (pp. 657–680). Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199376377.013.38.