Evolution Is Not Egalitarian
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Comment: Intergenerational Wealth Transmission and Inequality in Premodern Societies

Evolution Is Not Egalitarian

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The birds who does have the feed will hum; those that isn' got the feed wouldn' be able to hum.
—Coconut villager, 1956 (Rodman 1971:xii)

Yahi yamako buhii makuwi, suw kb yamako buhii barowo! (Even though we do like meat, we like women a whole lot more!)
—Yanomamo male (Chagnon 1997:97)

The deep evolutionary roots of inequality are evident in our complex hormonal and psychological responses to social status and its profound effects on our health (Farmer 2004; Flinn 2006). Like all other organisms, humans evolved to "use the least energy and take the lowest risks in securing the highest quality and quantity of resources and converting them into their own genetic materials" (Alexander 1979:17). This dictum from evolutionary biology is not easily translated into human economics. Humans are extraordinarily social creatures; we habitually gather, control, and redistribute resources via group networks. Relationships trump individual material utility. Marriage, kinship, and alliance are paramount. Among humans, securing resources for reproduction involves social power (Alexander 2006).

Michael Mann (1986, 1993), in his classic *The Sources of Social Power*, identifies four primary resources: information (ideology), economics (material goods), military (aggressive force), and political (organizational). Mann's scheme fits well with the concept of wealth—including material, embodied, and relational—proposed and analyzed in this special section. But whereas Mann grounds the origins of inequality in power differentials, Bowles, Smith, and Borgerhoff Mulder (2010) suggest that transmissibility of wealth is key. Different types of wealth are posited to have properties that affect transfer from generation to generation. Some kinds of material wealth, with greater permanence and controllability, are suggested to have higher potential for disproportionate accumulation among lineages over time. Greater disparities (higher Gini index) may emerge with historical shifts in the balance among the types of wealth—toward material and away from relational and embodied.

The links between social power and wealth transfers are embedded in several core aspects of human biology. Our species is characterized by an unusual suite of life-history and social characteristics, including (*a*) physically altricial (helpless) infants; (*b*) long childhoods; (*c*) extensive biparental care, including large transfers of information; (*d*) long lifetimes with multiple overlapping generations; (*e*) extended, bilateral kin networks, including life-long bonds among siblings and other relatives; and (*f*) stable mating relationships and consequent ties among affinal kin (for discussion, see Alexander 1990; Chapais 2008; Flinn et al. 2007). These aspects of our biology influence patterns of parental and kin investment in unique ways (Alexander 1987; Flinn and Low 1986), including arranged marriages between kin-based coalitions (e.g., Chagnon 1979).

Human biology also is characterized by an unusual suite of information-processing characteristics, including (*a*) large brains; (*b*) sociocognitive aptitudes such as empathy, theory of mind, and self-awareness; (*c*) language; (*d*) complex social learning; and (*e*) creativity (for review, see Geary 2005). These mental attributes enable culture and the emergent changes in subsistence and wealth distribution that are so impressively documented in this special section.

The cultural development of resources that are accumulated and transferred (inherited)—such as domesticated animals, gold, royal status, fishing skills, and land ownership—may codevelop with patterns of family and kinship, including male/female bias (e.g., Fox 1972; Goody 1976; Hartung 1982). Women and men often receive different kinds and amounts of resources from their relatives, providing further opportunities for examining relations among types of wealth, inequality, and power structures that influence resource transfers.

The issue of how to tease apart the transmissibility of resources from social power remains perplexing. This problem is shared with attempts to understand the development of plant/animal domestication and complex social organization

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(e.g., Cohen 2009). Material wealth that appears constant—for example, an acre of land—has changing utility based on the behavior and motivations of the people using it. Embodied and relational wealth—for example, warrior status—have changing utility based on cultural context (Beckerman et al. 2009; Chagnon 1988). The material and the social have seemed inextricably intertwined in cultural evolution regardless of how we attempted to categorize and measure them. The breadth and quality of data examined in this forum, however, have pushed the envelope in many exciting new directions. The inclusion of measures of reproduction, anthropometrics, labor exchange, land ownership, hunting productivity, and so forth (I stopped counting after noting 20 distinct measures!) is remarkable; that these measures are integrated into a coherent analytical and theoretical framework is astonishing.

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