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Commentary on "Précis of *Vaulting Ambition: Sociobiology and the Quest for Human Nature*," by Philip Kitcher, University of California, San Diego

Testing sociobiological hypotheses ethnographically

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A characteristic of new theory is that it allows old questions to be recast. This poses difficulties for the use of previous information, gathered when different theoretical assumptions guided data collection. The use of ethnographic data by scholars wishing to test the generality of the predictions of evolutionary theory runs precisely into this problem. A good example appears in Kitcher's discussion (p. 296) of ethnographic cases in which people appear to be acting against their fitness interests by directing resources to adopted children. Cultural norms in some societies (in the cases discussed) apparently dictate that sociological fathers accept their wife's offspring by other men. Yet sociobiologists predict that men will resist investing in unrelated offspring. [See also Hartung: "Matrilineal Inheritance" *BBS* 8(4) 1985.]

The problem lies in the nature of the data. For many decades cultural anthropologists have explained the social forms of a given society in terms of established norms for behavior. Although ethnographers recognized that actual behavior was more variable, they believed that social rules generally were upheld and that agreements about how to behave were the necessary basis for the integration of a social system. Conflict, competition, and outright cheating among actors within a social system received appreciably less attention. In recent years many cultural anthropologists have shifted away from functionalist assumptions and have focused in a systematic way on individual behavior. From this perspective it is clear that individuals perform many actions, only some of which in fact conform to social norms. However, when people go against prevailing standards they generally try to justify what they do (argue that what they are doing is not *really* antisocial; Bledsoe 1980). Such people also attempt to muster support for their actions in some subsection of the population, and to the extent they are successful, they can eventually challenge existing standards (Barth 1969).

In the case of the apparently anomalous finding that men willingly foster unrelated offspring, the problem revolves around the level of generality of the cultural rule. There may or may not be such a cultural value, and it may or may not be

widely honored. Resolution of the issue would require that the ethnographer undertake a stratified sample of the population when interviewing and observing about the matter. These niceties were rare in early anthropological research. Similarly, one would need to know how fostered offspring actually fared in comparison with natural children of the same household. Data of the latter sort are only recently beginning to be collected, and the findings indicate that, in general, children receive better treatment from close kin (especially one or both biological parents) than they do from more distant or unrelated sponsors (Isiugo-Abanihe 1985).

In sum, satisfactory tests of sociobiological theory using data on humans suffer from many problems, many of which are cogently argued by Kitcher. Other obstacles derive from the fact that cultural anthropology itself is undergoing a paradigm shift, in which people are no longer considered to be influenced by the normative environment with a high degree of predictability. Information about human behavior guided by this new set of assumptions is far more likely to yield the type of data necessary to test sociobiological ideas. Once the construct of culture is abandoned (or at least not assumed to have much power for predicting behavior), social scientists will approach the study of humans in ways that are increasingly similar to the approaches of biologists to nonhuman animals.

A particularly interesting example of the discrepancy between culture and behavior is male–female relations in the New Guinea highlands (Meggitt 1964). Throughout the highlands men agree that women are dangerous and liable to sap their strength or worse. Heider (1976) reports, for example, that the Dani have no interest at all in sex. The demography of another group, the Gainj, has been well studied by Wood et al. (1985) and Johnson (1981). They find that, after accounting for lactational effects, fertility is like that of young sexually active couples – that is, biology denies the supposed lack of sexual activity. Earlier ethnographers would probably have accepted the reported norms as data, whereas those with an evolutionary bent may suspect that values about male/female relations serve institutionalized male–male competition and that most men ignore or, at least, overcome inhibitions as they age (Draper & Harpending 1982). These cultural norms, from the evolutionary perspective, are perhaps best regarded as deceitful messages to be overcome rather than as guidelines to correct behavior. Right or wrong, the evolutionary view generates testable hypotheses for fieldworkers to resolve.

Good paradigm shifts do not throw out the baby with the bath. For example, the finding that people do not follow cultural rules does not mean that acquaintances do not develop shared understandings. They do, but these understandings constitute the framework within which social negotiations take place and they do not reflect behavior in any simple fashion.