
Beyond the Justification Hypothesis: A Broader Theory of the Evolution of Self-Consciousness

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We evaluate Henriques' Justification Hypothesis (JH; this issue, pp. 1207–1221) and argue that his explanation for the evolution of self-consciousness is overly narrow and the evolutionary sequence of events is backwards. Instead, we propose a broader theory of the evolution of self-consciousness, with four categories of adaptive functions: (a) self-regulation, (b) selective information processing, (c) understanding others, and (d) identity formation. © 2004 Wiley Periodicals, Inc. *J Clin Psychol* 60: 1271–1273, 2004.

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In his unified theory of psychology, Henriques (this issue, pp. 1207–1221) proposes that a key distinction between human psychology and the psychology of nonhuman animals is the human species' unique capacity for self-consciousness. This idea is a major strength of Henriques' theory, and we agree that the evolution of self-consciousness is an important aspect of human psychology. However, we take issue with Henriques' explanation of why self-consciousness evolved. In this comment, we critically evaluate Henriques' explanation and propose an alternative theory.

Any theory that attempts to explain why self-consciousness evolved must answer the question: "How did the self facilitate the goals of survival and reproduction during the evolutionary history of the species?" (Robins, Norem, & Cheek, 1999, p. 461). Henriques' answer to this question is laid out clearly in his Justification Hypothesis (JH): "the

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human ego evolved in response to the selection pressure created by the adaptive problem of justifying one's actions to others" (2003, p. 166).

According to Henriques, the problem of justification arose because language "provides a means to more directly access and assess the thoughts and intentions of others" (2003, p. 170). Self-consciousness evolved in response to this new adaptive problem. However, we find this sequence of events implausible because it would require that humans had access to one another's thought processes before they had access to their own thought processes (which would require self-consciousness). Instead, we see self-consciousness as a means to understanding the thought processes of others. As Hobbes argues in *Leviathan*: "[Given] the similitude of the thoughts and passions of one man to the thoughts and passions of another, whosesoever looketh into himself and considereth what he doth when he does think, opine, reason, hope, fear . . . shall thereby read and know what are the thoughts and passions of all other men upon like occasions." In other words, there can be no awareness of others' minds in the absence of an awareness of one's own mind. Thus, the problem of justification could not exist without self-consciousness, so it is not possible for self-consciousness to have evolved in response to the problem of justification.

Instead, we propose that self-consciousness evolved before the problem of justification existed and was eventually co-opted to serve as a "justification filter," in addition to its other functions.

If the problem of justification was not the reason for the evolution of self-consciousness, then what was the reason? We suspect that Henriques was not far off the mark, and believe that the adaptive function of self-consciousness is indeed social in nature. In fact, we argue that the function of self-consciousness is simply a broader version of the "justification filter": to help individuals identify, negotiate, and promote their status in a social group. These skills would have been particularly useful to humans because of the complex structure of their social environment.

Robins et al. (1999) identified four specific functions of the self that fall within this broader function: self-regulation, information-processing, understanding others, and identity formation. The first adaptive function, self-regulation, includes everything from regulating complex physical movement, which may have been the most primitive function of self-consciousness (Povinelli, 1998), to coordinating the pursuit of long-term goals. These self-regulatory activities help individuals maintain and enhance social acceptance and status, and thus are tied to access to resources and reproductive success.

The second adaptive function of the self is the information-processing filter. This entails selective processing of information about the world and one's place in it. In a complex social environment in which the individual is bombarded with information from multiple sources, it is adaptive to filter out extraneous information and focus selectively on self-relevant information. For example, a number of studies have shown that individuals show selective attention to and heightened memory for self-relevant information. These information-processing activities help individuals make sense of their complex social world, and thus function more effectively in it.

The third adaptive function of the self is to understand, predict, and manipulate others. By becoming conscious of our own mental states, we can project onto others and speculate about their thoughts and emotions. This facilitates introspectively-based social strategies such as empathy, sympathy, gratitude, deception, and pretense. This function of the self allows us to hold others accountable (i.e., make internal, stable attributions for others' actions), and is most similar to the function proposed by Henriques. Indeed, the same aspect of the self that enables us to hold others accountable was probably co-opted to serve the purpose of justifying our actions to others. One function of understanding

others' minds is that it allows us to manipulate others and their impressions of us, a crucial skill for negotiating one's position in a social group.

The fourth adaptive function of the self is to facilitate identity formation. The evolution of the self allowed humans to internalize their social roles and develop stable identities. The ability to create internal representations of one's position in society and one's relationships with others is adaptive because identities allow us to differentiate ourselves from others, provide a sense of continuity over time, and help us adapt to complex social environments.

In summary, we agree with Henriques that the evolution of the self facilitated individuals' navigation of their social environments. However, we believe that Henriques' JH assumes an overly narrow function for the self, and the proposed evolutionary sequence is backwards. We propose instead that the self evolved in response to more basic social pressures and was eventually co-opted to solve the problem of justification. We do, however, agree with the bottom line of the JH—that the evolution self-consciousness served as a bridge from the individual to culture. Indeed, our position is entirely compatible with the idea that the evolution of self-consciousness allowed humans to create a complex social structure that served as the basis for human culture.

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