

in press: *The American Journal of Psychology*  
Running head: encore

**Suburban Gloss:  
Reply to Kenrick and Lundberg-Kenrick**

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1,117 words of text

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Keywords: motivation, evolution, judgment, bourgeoisie

To understand motivation is to understand an essential part of the human soul. The evolutionary model of presented by Kenrick and Lundberg-Kenrick is a prominent and influential effort to understand what humans want and what they might do to get it. The goal of my review – besides applauding the effort – was to note that the model itself cannot answer all the questions it raises. Extraneous assumptions are brought to bear, which opens the door for value judgments.

To my reading, the authors strike a bourgeois tone. I did not imply or suggest, as the Kenricks claim I did, that they seek to promote materialist or capitalist values. Instead, the tone of bougieness is set by the conservative value they place on the harmoniously cohabiting middle-class family. In this Norman-Rockwell world everyone is content cooperating with and hugging those who are close and keeping the bad guys at arm's length (“Don't insult young males,” p. 88). To be sure, the authors claim to write “for people of all reproductive persuasions, for those who choose not to reproduce, and for all sexual orientations and gender identities” (p. 34), but this smells like a politically correct pacifier. The book does not appear to be written for all those identities.

The argument that the suburban idyll aligns with powerful psychological motives can be made. However, to place moral value on these motives because they are part of the evolved psychological equipment is to commit the naturalistic fallacy. More precisely, it is a partial commitment of the naturalistic fallacy. Selfish, exploitative, or off-the-grid behaviors can also be traced to the action of evolved motives, but one would not want to look to them as moral standards. Our biologically evolved motives are value-free; they just are what they are. Within the context of culture, however, behaviors arising from these motives present themselves to us as desirable or objectionable. A middle-class family elects to have two

children and raise them to maturity, whereas Genghis Khan goes on a rampage of rape. Both strategies serve the motive of reproduction, but they are not morally endorsed in the same way.

Whereas Kenrick and Lundberg-Kenrick distance themselves from the bourgeois perspective in their rejoinder, they use frank language in the book. Writing prescriptively, they assert that “we believe the role model for a personally fulfilling life is not Genghis Khan, who was successful in passing on his genes, but a woman named Osceola [*sic*] McCarty, who never had offspring” (p. 13). The contrast between the highest biological motive of having and parenting children, and the moral recommendation of being self-denyingly altruistic is stark. Following Oseola’s lead requires the deployment of self-regulatory resources lying beyond the purview of the motivational model. “Rather than emulating Genghis Khan and giving free rein to our ancestral selfish desires to kill, rape, plunder, and otherwise self-indulge, we instead need to understand our inner Genghis Khan to help him settle down and enjoy a more civilized life” (p. 15). Kenrick and Lundberg-Kenrick conclude that their book uncovers “suggestions for how we can all be more like Os[c]eola McCarty.” What if we succeed? Who will beget the children?

A domesticated Khan is a bougie Khan. By which motive might he make himself so? He needs to reach outside of the biologically prepared toolbox and find a way to self-regulate. What does this mean? Can humans choose their own motives in order to satisfy a higher-order need? More often than not, the need to curb biologically evolved inclinations requires renunciation. Let us not eat all the available calories and let us not love all the available lovers a well-socialized individual might say. Psychological science provides some tools to deal with these challenges. You can, the authors suggest, “actively rig your

reinforcements” (p. 6) – and temptations. Do not think about sex; think about love. Doing so will make you “less keen to even look at alternative possibilities” (p. 202). This sounds a bit puritanical and the authors tactfully do not say whether Baron Münchhausen’s self-regulation makes him more attracted to his spouse.

In their rejoinder, the authors assert that my “inference that [they] are pro-monogamy doesn’t match [their] own assessment.” How did I get this impression? In their chapter “How do fools stay in love,” the authors declare that they “have been working on the assumption that’s what’s right for you is to stay in a relationship” (p. 206). I take this to be an endorsement of monogamy. Then comes the acknowledgement that sometimes there are good reasons to leave. “A bad relationship partner, like a nasty boss at work, can actually be harmful to your health” (p. 206). Frida Kahlo, the childless lover of Diego Rivera is offered – or so it seems – as an example of a person who should have left. Yet, there is a condition. “If there are no children involved, and a relationship is making you feel bad about yourself, it may be the right choice to take the first train out of town and not look back” (p. 204).

Frida Kahlo chose revenge through equity. Since Diego had many lovers, so did she. I recall meeting one of them, Mr Werner Berggruen, in Berlin – but that is beside the point. The question is how we should think of Ms Kahlo. Should she not have gotten even? Should she have left? Arguably, these questions and their answers lie outside of the realm of motivational psychology. Most troubling, and most suggestive of the Kenricks’ endorsement of bourgeois monogamy is their unquestioned insertion of the absence of children as a condition of leaving. What is the evidence for the implied claim that children are better served by parents who stay together although they hate each other than by divorce? Lastly,

why should being made to feel bad about oneself be the decisive motivator for leaving? Is a physically abusive spouse not enough?

The critical part of my review was concerned with the treatment of the cultural and moral territory beyond the pyramidal paradigm proper. It is one thing to have a well-ordered and biologically grounded framework of human motivation. It is another thing to counsel readers on how to self-manage against their own motivational needs and do so in order to satisfy the requirements of a civilized, if neo-puritanical, society. In the Kenricks' book the lines between science and moralism are too blurred for my taste. There is something to be said for Maslow's (1943) pyramid of needs on the ruins of which the Kenricks' erected their own. Maslow saved a place for the human need to fulfill its own potential, and do so in opposition to society if need be. The Kenricks rather emerge as champions of conformity – in other words as bougie.

## References

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