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THE *Current*

March 8, 2012

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Leda Cosmides and John Tooby Receive UCSB Faculty's Top Honor

The faculty of UC Santa Barbara has bestowed its highest honor on Leda Cosmides and John Tooby, professors of psychology and anthropology, respectively. Internationally recognized as the founders of the influential field of evolutionary psychology, Cosmides and Tooby have been named joint recipients of the Faculty Research Lecturer Award for 2012.

In announcing the award, the UCSB Academic Senate noted that the scholars are credited with creating and shaping the modern framework for evolutionary psychology, which, according to one colleague, represented nothing less than a "scientific revolution" within the field of psychology. Their evolutionary approach to cognition culture is viewed as one of the most important new perspectives in the cognitive sciences in the past 50 years. Furthermore, their sustained rate of high-quality theoretical and empirical research continues to both lead and underpin the field.

The Faculty Research Lectureship was established in 1955, and Cosmides and Tooby share the 57th award. Their Faculty Research Lecture will take place on campus, and will be free and open to the public. The date and location of the lecture have not yet been determined.

"I was delighted to hear that Professor Cosmides and Professor Tooby were chosen as the 2012 recipients of our Faculty Research Lecturer Award," said UCSB

Chancellor Henry T. Yang. "This very special recognition is a testament to the high regard our campus holds for their groundbreaking scholarship, outstanding research contributions, and scientific leadership in the field of evolutionary psychology. We look forward to their Faculty Research Lecture later this year."

Last year's recipient of the prestigious honor was Linda Petzold, a professor of mechanical engineering and computer science, and a renowned authority on computational science and engineering. Her Faculty Research Lecture, "Adventures in Computing," took place last December.

"We are excited to receive this award," noted Cosmides and Tooby. "There is so much truly remarkable research going on at UCSB that this was completely unexpected. We feel very honored to be recognized in this way by our colleagues."

In spearheading the new field of evolutionary psychology, Cosmides and Tooby, who are co-directors of UCSB's Center for Evolutionary Psychology, have integrated knowledge from a variety of fields, including evolutionary biology, cognitive neuroscience, primatology, and behavioral ecology. In doing so, they have explored the extent to which the human mind contains neuro-computational mechanisms that evolved to solve specific adaptive problems repeatedly faced by humans across their evolutionary history.

"Evolutionary Foundations in Culture," their chapter in the book "The Adapted Mind," which they also co-edited, is regarded as one of the most important publications in psychology in the 1990's. That paper, along with a dozen or so related publications, created what scholars have described as a paradigm shift in thinking in the field of psychology that extends into the social sciences. The work of Cosmides and Tooby is now seen as foundational in fields such as political science, sociology, and economics, among others.

In "Evolutionary Foundations of Culture," they compared the Standard Social Science Model (one that assumes a small number of general-purpose programs that allow reasoning and learning of many different kinds) with the tenets of evolutionary psychology (which proposes special-purpose programs that evolved to solve specific types of problems). In a relatively short period of time, the proposed framework became accepted as one of the major approaches to both psychology and anthropology.

In selecting Cosmides and Tooby for the 2012 honor, the Faculty Research Lecture Committee also noted that a central feature of their respective careers is a sustained -- and, indeed, escalating -- rate of scientific productivity. Their work has received more than 20,000 citations, with more than 50 papers cited at least 50 times. Their research has appeared in top journals, including Nature, Science, the Proceedings of the Royal Society of London, the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, Psychological Review, Psychological Bulletin, Behavioral and Brain Sciences, and Harvard Business Review.

In addition, they were jointly recognized as recipients of the J.S. Guggenheim Memorial Award, and Cosmides was selected for a 2005 National Institutes of Health Directors' Pioneer Award, an honor she shared with Tooby. Only 23 of these awards have ever been given, and Cosmides is the only behavioral scientist ever to receive one. The award is reserved for those "willing and able to explore ideas that were considered risky at the inception," and who are "truly visionary thinkers who are able to make those leaps and change the current paradigms of medical research."

Tooby joined the Department of Anthropology at UCSB in 1990, and Cosmides joined the Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences in 1991. Both professors completed their undergraduate and graduate degrees at Harvard, and were fellows at Stanford University's Center for Advanced Study before becoming members of the UCSB faculty.

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