

Evolutionary Psychology

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Book Review

Evolutionary Psychology and Violence edited by Richard W. Bloom and Nancy Dess. Praeger: Westport, CT and London, 2003.

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This is a surprisingly important book. It has the uneven character of most edited volumes—it arose from a symposium at the American Psychological Association in 2000—but it represents much of the best thinking about violence being done in evolutionary psychology today. It is motivated by a strong and generative theory, grounded in broad and persuasive evidence, and applied to a category of practical human problems that affect us all.

In the first chapter Richard Bloom introduces what he calls the GEPP—the General Evolutionary Psychology Perspective—and counters four misconceptions about it: that it requires behavior to be genetically determined, claims that behavior can't be changed, posits this as the best of all possible worlds, and “conceives of people to be consciously or otherwise motivated to spread their genes wide and far.” Of course, Bloom understands that there must be *some* hereditary contribution in order for Darwinian principles to apply, but he rightly emphasizes the interactive aspects of development. And he no doubt accepts that people, if they aren't motivated to spread their genes far and wide in the short run, must act so as to do that in the long run.

Roger Masters, a political scientist ably practicing evolutionary psychology since long before it had that name, contributes the second chapter. Although it seems out of place in this book—it has little directly to do with evolution or its consequences—it is potentially very important. He summarizes evidence that when silicon fluoride is added to drinking water it enhances the body's uptake of lead, “a neurotoxin that lowers dopaminergic function in the inhibitory circuits of the basal ganglia,” [p. 43] and that this effect increases rates of violent crime where water is so treated. SiF also increases manganese content of water, and the two elements (lead and manganese) interact to produce a more than additive effect on crime. Masters reasonably concludes “that a moratorium on the use of SiF in public water supplies would be a relatively low-cost policy capable of lowering rates of substance abuse and violent crime.” [p. 49] The epidemiological analyses are very challenging and no doubt subject to criticism, but at a minimum, this

possibility deserves further study.

The book's remaining chapters fall within the more typical subject matter of evolutionary psychology. Stuart Kinner analyzes psychopaths, a mere one percent of the population who account for more than half of serious crimes. These individuals have often been shown to be low on empathy and high on risk taking, sensation seeking, and Machiavellianism (dominance through persuasive manipulation of others). Since there is both genetic and neurological evidence that this is a largely biological trait, an explanation is needed for its high prevalence. It is readily found in the tendency of psychopaths to seduce and even coerce sexual victims, of whom there are many. It is strange that Kinner does not cite Henry Harpending and Pat Draper, who published a similar model in 1988 (on "cad" vs. "dad" reproductive strategies), in a volume that was a precursor of this one. He reasonably suggests, however, that if psychopathy is a biological adaptation it cannot be treated (clinical data confirm this) and society has to be protected from psychopaths by warning and educating the public and by incarcerating repeat offenders until they age out of the period of greatest criminal activity.

Linda Mealey's chapter is perhaps the best in the volume. Drawing on her own work on psychopathy and gender differences, she addresses the complex problem of rape and its prevention from the viewpoint of evolutionary psychology, but with the humane perspective of a wise and compassionate woman. Courting severe criticism, she rejects the implausible feminist notion that rape has nothing to do with sex and concedes that some women are attracted to aggressive sexuality. (She also says "the bulk of evidence suggests that availability of pornography does not encourage sexual violence" [p. 102] and recommends decriminalization and licensing of prostitution, which she thinks can be a free and legitimate choice.) Mealey does cite Harpending and Draper, but entertains at least seven other models, not necessarily mutually exclusive; all have some empirical support. In the end she urges that we "carve nature at its joints" by redefining rape in a way that recognizes its evolutionary background and its different varieties, contexts, and motivations. This, she believes, will lead to effective prevention strategies.

David Buss and Joshua Duntley next present an evolutionary perspective on homicide, which owes much to the work of Martin Daly and Margo Wilson, whom they oddly characterize as denying that homicide can be an adaptation. Buss and Duntley reasonably cite the hunter-gatherer environment as a setting where it can be adaptive, and rightly call attention to what must be a coevolutionary arms race between homicide perpetrators and their potential victims. They don't cite John Maynard Smith's Hawk/Dove model of an evolutionarily stable strategy that limits violence, and they often state the obvious, such as that fear of homicide must also have evolved or that homicide "is usually costly to the victim." They repeatedly cite work in progress on violent fantasies and other psychological approaches to the problem, but give no details in the

chapter. They rightly suggest that understanding the situations for which homicide may be adaptive—for example, competitive infanticide—will help direct policy and save resources—for example, be more vigilant for child abuse or pedicide when stepfathers are present. But these recommendations, valuable as they are, have been made by Daly and Wilson, among others, for many years. It is hard to see this chapter as a separate contribution.

In chapter 6 Sheldon Solomon, Jeff Greenberg, and Tom Pyszczynski add a much needed humanistic and psychodynamic dimension to the evolutionary psychology approach. Quoting classics like Ernest Becker's *Denial of Death* and Susanne Langer's *Mind: An Essay on Human Feeling*—not to mention Shakespeare, Camus, and others—they propose that the awareness of the inevitability of death was a watershed event in human evolution and that it permanently lowered our self-esteem and heightened our tendency to violence. Their own experimental research and that of others shows that introducing “mortality salience”—for example, asking subjects to write down what they think will happen to them as they physically die—increases subsequent bigotry and anger. (In an intriguing experiment, people subjected to mortality salience poured twice as much hot sauce into the food of victims different from them than into the food of those similar to them, while a control group showed no such difference.) The authors recommend disseminating evolutionary ideas, raising self-esteem to combat mortality salience, and emphasizing the unity of our species.

Harold Fishbein and Nancy Dess also contribute a chapter on intercultural conflict, but don't focus on fear of death as a factor. Rather they present a cogent and helpful overview of the evolutionary background to violence not in theory but in fact, reviewing the evidence on non-human primates and human hunter-gatherers and going on to summarize literature in several social sciences that bears on in-group vs. out-group processes and the human tendency to accept authority, legitimate or not. Their policy suggestions are predictable but sensible, and I think this chapter would be an excellent place to start for any student seeking a base for exploration in this field.

Christopher Boehm, an anthropologist who has spent his life trying to understand violence in humans and other species, takes on the daunting problem of national conflict and the obstacles to world government. His amusing comparison of the “alpha-chimpanzee Goblin with a typical UN secretary general” is worth the price of admission, and it has a serious side. Until, like Goblin, the UN leader has the force to back up his authority, he will not be able to intervene as Goblin does to stop conflict among others. Boehm recognizes how daunting it is to try to stop international conflict, but sees the UN as the best path. This may be right, but only in the very long run, and some readers will doubt that this uneven institution, the majority of whose members are non-democratic governments—many frankly despotic—can become in any acceptable sense a democracy of nations.

In a concluding chapter, Nancy Dess reviews the history of debate about evolution and aggression, detailing challenges from the politically motivated right and left, and correctly bemoaning the fact that most people reject evolution and decline to be compared to animals. All of us, she rightly believes, must get used to “embracing all of what it means to be human, not just what we wish to believe about it ourselves.” [p. 263]

This book should help bring about that awareness. Sociobiology and evolutionary psychology have triumphed over their academic enemies; they are successful not only because of the power of theory but because of the relentless pursuit of relevant evidence, much of it reviewed here. Increasingly it looks like normal science. A few years into the revolution, anthropologist Irven DeVore told a skeptical student “the data are sitting up and begging.” Today the data are sitting up, begging, rolling over, fetching, jumping through hoops, and playing catch. Criticism is healthy, and fierce ongoing debates characterize the discipline. Much of the tired flailing against these approaches in the name of political correctness has fortunately gone to sleep. But when it comes to such sensitive policy issues as violence, crime, war, prejudice, and rape, politically motivated criticism still rears its ugly head.

Those responsible are standing squarely in the way of honest scientific attempts to illuminate some of our gravest social problems, and are standing in the way of real solutions. These critics should pack up their stale wares and go home. A new generation of neo-Darwinian thinkers is approaching these problems not with a gleeful dismissiveness of other approaches, but with respect for the complexity of the determinants of behavior in general and with compassion for the victims of destructive behavior in particular. In their hands there is at least a chance that those problems will be solved, and that the facts and theory of evolution will—as indeed they must—be part of the solution.

Reference

Harpending, H. and Draper, P. (1988). Antisocial behavior and the other side of cultural evolution. In Moffitt, T. E., and Mednick, S. A. (Eds.). *Biological contributions to crime causation* (pp. 293-307). Dordrecht, The Netherlands: Martinus Nijhoff.

Note

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