

### Book Review

#### More Than a Hunch, and Less Than a Certainty

A review of Douglas W. Mock, *More Than Kin and Less Than Kind: The Evolution of Family Conflict*, Harvard University Press, 2006. 288 pp. US\$16.95 ISBN 13 978-0-674-02248-5 (paperback)

David P. Barash, Psychology Department, University of Washington, Seattle, WA, Email: dpbarash@u.washington.edu

Students of human behavior have – albeit belatedly and insufficiently – begun to examine the implications of inclusive fitness theory for *Homo sapiens*. Ditto for the implications of anisogamy, patterns of parental investment, and differential confidence of genetic relatedness to offspring, when it comes to male-female differences. Many other new domains of research could similarly be identified, all opened up by evolutionary insights that were initiated by theoreticians and that have subsequently been shown to be fruitful via the work of empiricists.

I have long felt, however, that the theory of parent-offspring conflict has received less than it warrants: for all its superb insights, as well as the prospect of offering hefty, and novel payoffs, developmental psychologists have been unaccountably slow to begin picking, or even nibbling, at this low-hanging fruit of evolutionary wisdom. The paperback reprinting of Douglas W. Mock's fine 2004 book, *More Than Kin and Less Than Kind*, provides an opportunity to bemoan this oversight, while congratulating Mock on a job (admittedly incomplete) but well done.

As to the incompleteness, note first that Mock is a field zoologist, who for several decades has been conducting admirable research on the behavioral ecology of egrets and herons, documenting the often grisly interactions that transpire between parents and offspring and among siblings, revealing when and where theory is confirmed or disconfirmed (e.g., egret parents do not intervene - as theory would predict - to prevent siblicide, whereas egret sibs do, as anticipated, reduce their mutual aggression after brood reduction).

Nothing incomplete thus far; indeed, the author's immersion in data-based hypothesis-testing is both rigorous and gratifying to the reader. The only problem, such as it is, befalls the evolutionary psychologist interested in applying parent-offspring theory to human beings: Mock's work as a field biologist, not surprisingly, results in a laser-like focus on the role of food as a limiting factor, and brood reduction as the operative proximal mechanism for the birds he and others have studied. For the uninitiated, Mock offers a fine account of density-dependent versus density-independent mechanisms of population regulation, as well as an informed review of David Lack's justly influential "resource tracking" hypothesis. And not surprisingly, given the bulk of

empirical research on these matters as well as Mock's own long-continued efforts, birds hold pride of place.

For the evolutionary psychologist, by contrast, "parental bet-hedging" and issues of resource variability – although not trivial – are likely to be supplanted by other causes and manifestations of parent-offspring conflict theory. Not that Mock isn't aware of the relevance of said theory to his own species: He dedicates this book to his three older brothers (designated "A-chick," "B-chick," and "C-chick," and leaving no doubt that he sees himself – the "D-chick" – as having occupied the lowest rung of his sibling dominance hierarchy, with consequences both predictable and somewhat regrettable). But the book's focus is strictly limited to animals.

A second limitation is that *More Than Kin and Less Than Kind* gives short shrift to the role of Robert Trivers' brilliant and path-breaking 1974 paper. Trivers is indeed mentioned, and his work lauded as "subtle" and "classic," but more as a compulsory nod than in recognition of the seminal role it has played in the thinking of nearly all evolutionary biologists with even the slightest interest in behavior. This slight is only likely to further delay the impact that parent-offspring conflict theory must eventually have among developmental psychologists and even psychoanalysts.

Indeed, an evolutionary psychologist wanting an introduction to parent-offspring conflict theory would accordingly be well advised to go directly to Trivers' original manuscript and – if she had to choose, which fortunately is not the case – skip Mock's book altogether. Trivers does a far more compelling job of laying out the theory, and of describing its likely relevance to human beings. Better yet, read Trivers *and* Mock, the latter as a healthy corrective for theory's occasional but seductive tendency to wander beyond facts, like a cartoon character who walks off a cliff and somehow keeps going, so long as he doesn't look down.

Moreover, Mock's own excursions into theory occasionally misfire. He is intent on insisting that for parent-offspring theory to be validated in a truly interesting way, biologists must find cases in which offspring "win." Not at all: the key insight of Trivers' theory is its crucial and counter-intuitive finding that parents and offspring have differing genetic interests and patterns of expected conflict, all predictable on the basis of genetic asymmetries. Who wins is indeed interesting, but its significance can be – and has been – hotly debated. Don't get the wrong idea, however. Mock is a capable biological thinker, and has usefully collaborated with the superb theoretician Geoffrey Parker. But like Aristotle in Raphael's famous "School of Athens" painting, he gestures persistently downward, grounding his occasional rather plodding arguments in observable natural history facts, while Trivers opened up a new world by his more Plato-like concern with the upward perfection of theoretical "forms."

It should also be stated that Douglas Mock is a very graceful and effective writer, belying the image of the field worker as obdurate fact-grubber and semiliterate hillbilly. Here, for example, is his description of intra-sibling combat among great egret chicks: "[W]ithin a few days, as the chicks grow increasingly nettlesome, nearly anything can provoke a skirmish. The most inflammatory thing a subordinate can do is raise its head above the height of its social superior, since pecks are usually delivered from the tallest position a chick can muster. When one chick starts to get tall, a nestmate is likely to rise as well, the pair slowly extending upward like two flute-charmed cobras, keeping their

bills horizontal and staring fixedly at each other, until they run out of neck. A moment of teetering bluff follows, a pause to see if the rival will back down, and then ...”

And where else will an evolutionary psychologist, dutifully reading the professional literature, learn that in A.D. 978, Edward II (the Martyr) was fatally stabbed by his half-brother, Aethelred (the Unready), who then ascended to the throne?

## **Reference**

Trivers, Robert L. (1974). Parent-offspring conflict. *American Zoologist*, 14, 249-264.