



The Art and Science of Child Rearing

A Review of

Ancestral Landscapes in Human Evolution: Culture, Childrearing and Social Wellbeing

by Darcia Narvaez, Kristin Valentino, Agustín Fuentes, James J. McKenna, and Peter Gray (Eds.)

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Reviewed by

Alejandra Rossi 

Ancestral Landscapes in Human Evolution: Culture, Childrearing and Social Wellbeing provides an invitation to reflect on the fact that human nature is exquisitely complex. Although this complexity won't be a surprise to any social- or life scientist, this book highlights the value, often forgotten by experimentalists, of contextualized knowledge. It provides a unique opportunity to acquire fundamental knowledge about the evolution and scientific study of human childrearing.

In this edited volume, containing 15 chapters organized into the five sections (Baselines for Human Mammalian Development, Evolution's Baseline: Hunter-Gatherer Contexts, Contexts for the Evolution of Families and Children, Contexts Gone Awry, and Child Flourishing), the reader is given the opportunity to take a sneak peek into craftily made observations and elegantly designed studies that aim to shed light on this basic aspect of mammalian development. The authors of these chapters are well-known researchers from diverse fields. The diversity of backgrounds represented here is one of the main assets of this book. The content ranges within and across disciplines as seemingly unrelated as behavioral neuroscience, evolutionary biology, psychobiology, developmental psychology, and cultural anthropology.

This may sound unsettling at first; however, this whole volume in its full multidisciplinary certainly gives a broader and greater perspective than what each part would separately. Throughout the book, the chapters are masterfully placed in a way that connects ideas and knowledge through diverse perspectives.

The latter feature is what perhaps gives the reading of this book a novel-like feeling. From the basic and very well explained science behind epigenetic studies of parenting to the social and cultural effects of child maltreatment and posttraumatic stress disorder, this volume provides insight into methodologies taken by different disciplines and assists the reader in putting this knowledge into historical and cultural perspectives. The overall diversity and

richness of content give both the naïve and the erudite reader something to look forward to learning when reading its pages.

Chapter by chapter, this volume provides fundamental notions and descriptions of family making in the broad sense, from a variety of sources and perspectives—some of which a reader may agree with, others not. This book has the potential to stimulate critical debate and reflects the growing state of this fascinating area of research. For example, Dettmer, Suomi, and Hinde in Chapter 3 (“Nonhuman Primate Models of Mental Health: Early Life Experiences Affect Developmental Trajectories”) discuss the benefits behind breast-feeding and the relevance of making the science of “mother’s milk” a new area of research. In this chapter, the authors discuss data mainly from studies on rhesus monkeys but accompanied by data on rodents showing that the mother–infant bond is essential for the overall healthy development of infants. Although this might be a well-known fact, the authors complement their arguments introducing the relevance of studying the different components of this relationship with discussions of the influence of mother’s milk in the development of the infant along with its neurobehavioral outcomes.

Each chapter provides insights into different aspects of childrearing and parenting practices. These insights come not only from a highly scientific Westernized perspective but also from other cultures’ perspectives. This is the case, for instance, of Chapter 5 (“Batek Childrearing and Morality”), where Endicott and Endicott beautifully illustrate how the Batek people, nomadic hunter–gatherers located in Malaysia, rear their children and how the entire group takes part in socializing the child against aggressive behaviors and for cooperation. The authors describe the unfolding of common human constructs such as personality, morality, and well-being during different developmental stages. They also give an account of how some metaphysical ideas are culturally shaped on the Batek people, such as the notion of unnatural forces and the power of these on modulating their behaviors.

This kind of account helps the reader gain a broader perspective on the significance of culture in shaping some traits that some people might think are intrinsic or natural (e.g., aggression). Thus, the chapters will not only increase one’s knowledge and understanding of these issues but also provide insights into the inevitable human condition of being the children of, and possibly the parents of, other conspecifics. This knowledge, although specific, can always be related to areas as diverse as neuroscience and the effects of stressed mothers, child development and education, the effects of play in different cultural contexts, and how different societies conceptualize childrearing, among other topics.

At the end of each chapter are critical commentaries on the chapter by invited contributors. These are thought-provoking additions that offer distinct standpoints. Some commentaries expand the previous chapter’s content by showing relevant societal facts, such as Kendall-Tackett’s commentary (p. 104), which draws an interesting parallel between the chapter’s description of the Efe society’s understanding of childrearing and how it is made a valuable cultural experience even under uncertain environmental conditions (Chapter 4: “Relationships and Resource Uncertainty: Cooperative Development of Efe Hunter–Gatherer Infants and Toddlers” by Morelli, Henry, and Foerster) and the uncertain and sometimes harsh conditions that hundreds of thousands of new mothers deal with in the United States. This commentary is perhaps intended to draw the reader’s attention to how little is actually known in the developed world about new mothers’ caregiving and its consequences for their health.

Ancestral Landscapes in Human Evolution is undoubtedly comprehensive in the material it covers. However, due to its multidisciplinary nature, for some readers (depending on their area of expertise) there could be perceived discrepancies in expressions or technical acceptability, probably due to the diversity of backgrounds of the contributors. Given the obvious potential for this volume to be used as a student textbook, this issue should be addressed and discussed by the instructor or by an advisor.

Related to this point, the primary audiences for this book are psychologists, anthropologists, and, in general, people who find the topic of cultural diversity and the evolution of infant care noteworthy. Readers need not be well versed in these issues in order to enjoy each chapter and learn from it. However, although the contributors do provide evidence to support their conclusions, readers are not likely to find highly controlled experiments where variables have been manipulated or isolated and other extraneous factors have been controlled.

On the contrary, with the exception of a couple of chapters (particularly Chapter 2, "Epigenetics of Mammalian Parenting," and Chapter 3, "Nonhuman Primate Models of Mental Health: Early Life Experiences Affect Developmental Trajectories"), the contributors speak more of the patent unfeasibility of quantifying human experience as whole. Thus, researchers coming from a more basic or experimental tradition might find themselves preoccupied with the lack of experimental rigor; however, academics from these areas are invited to look at the phenomena of childrearing and child caregiving with fresh eyes. Those who do are likely to find a stimulating and promising read, regardless of the differences in methodologies.

In sum, *Ancestral Landscapes in Human Evolution* is a well-written, captivating book that makes the case that infant care is an immensely complex yet intrinsically natural endeavor for many species, with humans providing exquisite cases for study because of our species' astounding cultural diversity. This book is an open invitation for readers to reflect on our inherent mammalian condition and our historicity as a species; it also adds to the chain of recent literature concerning childrearing in different cultures (e.g., Hrdy, 2009) and in evolutionary psychopathology (e.g., Stevens & Price, 1996). These volumes highlight the importance of remembering that our experiences take place in a particular biological and cultural context; therefore, old practices should not be dismissed but should be contemplated and considered as fundamental pieces of human nature.

References

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