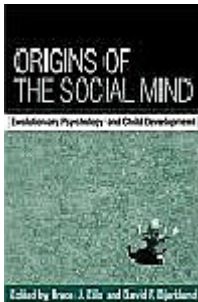


Evolutionary Perspective on Child Development

A review of



Origins of the Social Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and Child Development

by Bruce J. Ellis and David F. Bjorklund (Eds.)

New York: Guilford Press, 2005. 540 pp. ISBN 1-59385-103-0.\$65.00

Reviewed by

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Having taught child development for over 10 years, I have found that very few books cover a systemic approach to child development. *Origins of the Social Mind: Evolutionary Psychology and Child Development*, edited by Bruce J. Ellis and David F. Bjorklund, is a volume that covers the evolutionary perspective on child development, not your typical Freudian, Jungian, or Piagetian view of how a child grows and develops. This text takes the stance that child development is predicated on biological or genetic explanations. Essentially, evolutionary psychology combines the fields of biology and cognitive psychology. As Bjorkund and Ellis point out, very little attention has been paid to the application of evolutionary psychology to the field of child development.

There is now increasing realization that individuals must negotiate the landscapes of infancy and childhood before reaching adulthood, and that natural selection survey played

a substantial role in shaping the minds and the behaviors of juveniles as it did in shaping the minds and behaviors of adults. (p. 3)

I know in my child development classes, evolutionary theory is one of the last perspectives discussed, as my students have misconceptions and myths about evolutionary theory.

Conceptual Foundations of Evolutionary Developmental Psychology

The contributors to this text have excellent credentials, and Ellis and Bjorklund have done a thorough job editing the text. I was impressed with how incredibly well referenced the chapters are in the book. *Origins of the Social Mind* is well organized, beginning with chapters on the core issues and approaches in evolutionary developmental psychology. Of particular interest to me was the chapter in this section by James S. Chisholm, Victoria C. Burbank, David A. Coall, and Frank Gemmiti because it addresses the issue of attachment from the evolutionary perspective. Attachment and its impact on personal adult behavior later in life are key issues in child development.

Personality and Social Development

The next section of the text covers personality and social development. Judith Rich Harris's chapter addressing social behavior and personality development is intriguing because it focuses on the role of experiences with siblings and peers. Through my own research, I have found that siblings have a tremendous impact on development. Harris breaks down socialization into the social mechanisms as well as the behavioral strategy mechanisms. She makes a logical argument for the cultural acquisition of socialization.

One of the areas that I have a great deal of experience with and have published on is sexual abuse; therefore, I was interested in Irwin Silverman and Irene Bevc's chapter, "Evolutionary Origins and Ontogenetic Development of Incest Avoidance." They discuss the universal avoidance of incest as an adaptive function. In addition, they specifically cover mechanisms that have evolved over time that have promoted the avoidance of incest. This chapter is interesting because of the multicultural research that it presents covering countries such as Israel, China, and Lebanon.

Cognitive Development

The last section of the book focuses solely on cognitive development. I enjoyed the last chapter in this section, by David C. Geary, covering “Folk Knowledge and Academic Learning.” Geary takes the chapter from folk psychology to folk biology. He also talks about academic learning and, specifically, the motivation to control and the motivation to learn in school.

Another interesting chapter in this section is Jesse M. Bering's “The Evolutionary History of an Illusion.” It covers religious causal beliefs in children. His historical evolutionary approach begins with a quote by Freud. He discusses myths as well as the development of supernatural meanings and the questioning of those meanings in children. This counters some of the criticisms often brought up by students or colleagues when discussing evolutionary psychology.

Conclusion

As mentioned previously, evolutionary psychology is not without critics. This approach to psychology is often thought of as a nonepistemic approach, or one that is based on cultural values and not scientific values. Another issue involves Panglossianism, which in this context refers to the search for an adaptive reason for a person's behavior.

Panglossian explanations are simply the exercise of creative imagination over careful experimental investigation, for example our noses evolved to support spectacles as we grow older; earlobes evolved to support earrings, or benzodiazepine receptors evolved in the brain so that antianxiety drugs such as Librium and Valium would have somewhere to attach to. (University of Plymouth, 2005)

Although it sounds ridiculous to some, these are the arguments that students may come prepared to debate with respect to a text such as *Origins of the Social Mind*.

I often have students read the theories and find these criticisms or concerns themselves in order to stimulate critical thinking and promote Socratic dialogue. If one introduces evolutionary psychology into the classroom, one has to be prepared for the creationist arguments, many of which have been struck down in court.

A subsequent Louisiana law requiring “balanced treatment” for creationism and evolution was struck down by a trial court, and in 1987 the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the decision. The law, said the court, was unconstitutional because it advanced a religious

belief in a supernatural creation of human life. (WGBH Educational Foundation and Clear Blue Sky Productions, Inc., 2001)

This is a novel text with many excellent contributing writers. In addition, the book is well edited by Ellis and Bjorklund; yet, it is not easy reading. This text is meant for the professional educator or for graduate students, not undergraduate students. The book is a landmark in the field because it applies evolutionary theory to child development and adds to the nature–nurture debate, which most child development classes begin by discussing. If an instructor of an undergraduate class were to use this book as a guide, I think it would be helpful to young students, but it should not be required reading for them as it may frustrate them and is written at a level beyond their experience and education.

References

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