The Grandest Story Ever Told

Marvin Harris
Our Kind: Who We Are, Where We Came From, Where We Are Going
New York: Harper & Row, 1989.
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Review by
Bennett G. Galef, Jr.

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Few scientists have dared all that Marvin Harris has attempted in *Our Kind*, a popularized account of primate history from the evolution of the opposable thumb to development of modern nation-states. Along the way, through more than 500 thoroughly accessible pages of text, Harris attempts, albeit with varying degrees of success, to explain everything from why humans evolved large brains relative to their body weights (the extra brain cells provided redundant circuits to ensure continued brain function despite heat-stress-induced cell loss during long-distance pursuit of game) to why the Chinese "view a glass of milk as a loathsome secretion, akin to a glass of saliva" (p. 167; a large majority of adult Chinese have insufficient lactase to digest unfermented milk). This is a fine book for the beach or for reading while watching TV. It is provocative, witty, fun, and easy to read in bite-size snippets, but is it useful to the professional?

The organization of *Our Kind* is unusual. Its many pages have been divided into 102 two- to seven-page minichapters. Synthesis of these minichapters into larger units would have made intellectual issues easier to address than does the present essentially undifferentiated 502-page mass. As things stand, the book's success depends almost entirely on the wit and wisdom provided by the analyses in each minichapter. Although these explanations are invariably thought provoking, they vary tremendously in their power to convince.

Implicit in all discussions is Harris's position that once members of our genus acquired language, we left natural selection behind and entered a period of "cultural takeoff" in which cultures evolved as buffers between human social groups and their environments. In Harris's view, cultures meet the demands of human nature (a body of urges, needs, and vulnerabilities produced by natural selection). Consequently, human behavior is influenced only indirectly by human nature (the product of natural selection). The striving for reproductive success that can explain directly the behavior of animals that have not experienced "cultural takeoff" cannot explain human behavior. Of course, in such a model, human nature should be explicable in terms of striving for reproductive success, even if human behavior is not.

Similar discussions of human motives as products of natural selection, only indirectly reflected in overt human behavior, can be found throughout the literature of human sociobiology. One might, therefore, expect Harris to treat sociobiological explanations of human behavior positively. On the contrary, alternatives to sociobiological explanations of human behavior are a major part of *Our Kind*.

Harris is at his best discussing causes of unusual characteristics of non-Western cultures: why the Aztecs did not use wheels, why they engaged in wholesale human sacrifice. He is less successful in analyses of contemporary Western society (where evidence and political opinion often seem to carry roughly equal weight) and in providing alternatives to sociobiological explanations of the relative universals of human behavior.

Purported differences between men and women in the desire for multiple sex partners are dismissed as "men seek[ing] to promote an image of their subordinate's nature that contributes to the preservation of the status quo" (p. 21). The evidence that Harris presents is at least in part, however, consistent with the view that the motives of those women who take numerous lovers are less directly sexual than are those of men similarly engaged.

Human incest taboos are explained as resulting from a culturally based disinclination to lose potential trading partners, not as responses to deleterious consequences of inbreeding. Perhaps Harris is right, but if so, why do we not share with other vertebrate species a naturally selected reluctance to mate with close relatives?

"Headmen," who improve the general welfare of their fellow tribesmen at their own expense, are discussed as individuals who, "as a result of a mix of childhood experiences and heredity" (p. 366), have an especially strong desire for approval. Headmen can therefore be rewarded "not with food, sex, or increased bodily comforts, but with approval, admiration and respect—with prestige . . ." (p. 366). Sociobiologists might argue that a hereditary tendency that predisposed an individual to sacrifice reproduction for praise would soon disappear. Sociobiologists might also argue that if there is a hereditary predisposition toward being a superficially altruistic headman, that predisposition exists either because headmen got to inseminate a disproportionate number of female followers or because relatives of headmen got their hands on a disproportionate share of societal resources. Again, Harris may be right, but I know where I would put my money if I had to bet on whether leaders in any society had an inherited, exaggerated need for approval or enjoyed enhanced access to women and opportunities for nepotism.

The unsatisfying aspects of Harris's rejection of sociobiological explanations lie, first, in the indirectness of his attack (he infrequently describes or references empirical work that has been used to support positions with which he disagrees) and, second, in inconsistencies in his position. Harris asserts that "no single genetic predisposition can be used to explain anything about real human behavior" (p. 275), but then, as noted above, he explains headmen by reference to their supposed hereditary love of praise. Similarly, he explains the Chinese reaction toward milk as the result of a genetically influenced physiological process. Both are explanations of real human behavior in terms of genetic predispositions. Why should Harris use the hereditarian explanations he decries?

In the last paragraph of *Our Kind*, Harris proposes that "we must rid ourselves of the notion that we are an innately aggressive species for whom war is inevitable" (p. 502), as though there were a contemporary intellectual tradition that holds that inherited predispositions are immutable determinants of human behavior. In writing a popularized, indirect assault on this sociobiological straw man, Harris has produced a work of only limited interest to the professional.

In sum, as the blurbs on the dust jacket suggest, *Our Kind* is an entertaining and

provocative blend of paleontology, archaeology, and anthropology. Those who are familiar with the best of the sociobiological literature on similar issues and are looking for a consistent, convincing alternative will be disappointed. ■

Inkblots Across Cultural Lines

George A. De Vos and L. Bryce Boyer
Symbolic Analysis Cross-Culturally: The Rorschach Test
Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989. 531 pp.
ISBN 0-520-06086-5. $45.00

Review by
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In the 1940s, the Rorschach test was a prominent tool of personality appraisal in other cultures. With the decline of the culture and personality movement, its use across cultural lines has dwindled. The prevailing zeitgeist of cultural relativism has fueled skepticism of the use of projective tests in cross-cultural appraisal. In the present volume, De Vos and Boyer vigorously reassert the value of the Rorschach test in exploring personality in a variety of cultures. The book is based on a number of articles by authors whose writings are scattered throughout the psychological literature of several decades. These writings have been updated and revised, and the introductory and concluding chapters have been prepared for this volume. The quantitative analysis of Rorschach symbolism, as developed by De Vos in 1952, constitutes the core of the volume; detailed scoring rules are found in the appendix. Basically, De Vos goes beyond the conventional categories of Rorschach content to score it according to its affective meaning. To this end, Rorschach responses are scored for direct and indirect (symbolic) expressions of a variety of affective states (e.g., hostility, anxiety, and dependence). The rationale for this scoring system is explicitly psychoanalytic; it takes into account such concepts as cathexis, narcissism, psychosexual stages of development, and ego functioning.

This symbolic analysis was applied to three cultural groups: Japanese Americans relocated after World War II in the Chicago area, Algerian Arabs investigated in a Saharan oasis by the anthropologist Horace Miner, and the Apache and other Native Americans investigated by Boyer. The authors proceed from a strong commitment to the universals of human adaptation and socialization. These universals include organically based mental illness as well as the capacities for regressive reasoning under stress, altered states of consciousness, and magical thinking. Cultural differences come into play in the course of social and intellectual maturation and in the acceptance or rejection of unusual patterns of behavior. Adaptation and adjustment are sharply distinguished in this formulation; the former refers to a general mode of fulfilling needs and attaining goals in a realistic and socially acceptable fashion, whereas the latter involves conformity to the culturally typical patterns of behavior and thought. Generally, adaptation promotes flexibility in the face of new experiences, as illustrated by social change and acculturation.

The authors demonstrate that the Rorschach test is capable of bringing to the fore the culturally shared features of cognitive and affective experience. At the same time, they show that the Rorschach is sensitive to intragroup differences. The authors never equate a culture with a modal personality. Attention is devoted to the complex relation between psychopathology and deviance. Cautious conclusions are offered concerning the diagnostic use of the Rorschach in other cultures. Thus, De Vos and Boyer do not advocate the return to the era of the culture and personality movement in which large human groups were "diagnosed" and "analyzed" by means of the Rorschach. Rather, their approach is informed by the current state of knowledge on the complexity of the relation between culture and psychological characteristics.

One would wish for even more integration of the findings of modern cross-cultural psychology with the authors' approach, which, of course, antedates the emergence of cross-cultural psychology. Nonetheless, De Vos and Boyer provide a persuasive argument, with a substantial amount of empirical support, both for the general use of the Rorschach and the application of their symbolic analysis across culture lines. Time has now come to put theoretical argumentation to rest. The volume is an eloquent invitation to use the Rorschach in sophisticated cross-cultural research. Its place within this enterprise would appear to be modest, yet distinct: not as a tool of diagnostic categorization or as a predictor of behavior but as a unique, yet flexible, means for exploring the person's inner world and relating it to the challenges of adaptation in a variety of social settings. ■

In Search of the Domain of Human Learning

Thomas H. Leahey and
Richard J. Harris
Human Learning (2nd ed.)
Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1989. 451 pp. ISBN 0-13-445214-3.
$42.67; $32.00 (college bookstores)

Review by
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To some extent, all psychologists study learning. Whether the research focus is conditioning the gill–siphon reflex in *Aplysia*, deciphering the development of conservation, understanding our perceptions of others, or treating abnormal behavior, learning is intimately involved. It is probably also fair to say that all psychologists have a fundamental interest in understanding themselves. If we accept these two tenets, then what topic could be more natural for psychologists to study than human learning?