



Book Review

Driven: How Human Nature Shapes Our Choices. By Paul R. Lawrence and Nitin Nohria. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass (2002). ISBN 0-7879-6385-2.

Reviewed by Keith S. Harris

It is not the laboratory but the workplace that is the ideal setting to study human nature, according to Lawrence and Nohria. This book seeks to examine the common drives that shape human behavior, and to show how they evolved, what they evolved to accomplish, and how they still operate in both small and large-group settings.

Although this book has much to say about human psychology, authors Paul Lawrence and Nitin Nohria are not psychologists. Both are professors of organizational behavior at Harvard, and they well know that the individual human cannot be understood distinct from his or her reciprocity groups, of which the epitome is the modern tribe known as an organization.

As the authors remark about their own professional backgrounds, they “might seem like unlikely candidates to propose a new synthesis, a unified science of human nature. Yet we feel that we are ideally suited to the task [because] we have spent our entire careers studying the way people behave in that most fascinating setting of human behavior, the workplace” (p. 17). Humans are social creatures through and through. As undergraduate psychology majors universally learn, at its core, *all* psychology is

social psychology.

In their succinct, direct writing style, the authors first lay out their assumptions, which are based largely on the thoughts and theorizing of respected social science researchers and writers past and present; the list includes Steven Pinker, David Buss, Leda Cosmides, Richard Dawkins, Jared Diamond, Lawrence Kohlberg, Sarah Hrdy, Ian Tattersall, and many others.

The assumptions have varying degrees of research backing, but are all drawn from mainstream psychological thought (if evolutionary psychology can also now claim to be a mainstream theory). The evidence is clear, the authors observe, that the modern human is the product, physically, mentally and behaviorally, of the processes of natural selection. Further, they assert, the human brain is de facto a computational device. Our species’ brain has evolved across millions of years, with significant changes happening within the past 100,000 years, in parallel with advances in tool-making, language, and the growing complexity of our social groupings (e.g., the establishment of large communities and cities and the multiple layers of social norms and rules).

From these assumptions, Lawrence and

Nohria extract four basic drives that can be used to explain almost all of human behavior. As unique and individual as we each feel ourselves to be, we are also arguably more similar to all other humans than we are different from any one of them. Our common drives are as much the product of evolutionary processes as are the physical characteristics of Galapagos finches. Therefore the drives are common to all humans in all cultures, although of course culture determines how they will be expressed. The drives are described as follows:

- To acquire objects and experiences that improve our status relative to others;
- To establish long-term bonds with others based on reciprocity;
- To learn about and make sense of our world, which is largely our own social creation;
- To defend ourselves, our families and friends, our beliefs, and our resources.

These four drives are thought to work relatively independently, and this independence has both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, the independence allows individuals and groups more flexibility in behavioral repertoires, affording us the ability to adapt in complex environments and situations and improving mental efficiency by simplifying some categories of processes. “When there is no conflict between or among the drives . . . the mind is capable of signaling the action to be taken to the motor centers with minimal, if any, conscious awareness” (p. 146). However, when there is significant conflict, this independence leads to “abnormal psychological mechanisms such as repression” and has “guaranteed that humans have to make decisions that involve difficult trade-offs, difficult moral choices that other animals do not face. Since there are conscious choices (what is often called *free will*) . . . we cannot avoid seeing ourselves as causal agents. Our minds are designed to force us to feel responsible for all the consequences flowing from our decisions.” (p. 147)

According to the authors, it was the evolution of these four drives, with their necessary independence, which led directly (perhaps inevitably) to the development of culture, which is itself both subject to and the source of forces of natural selection. (Their choice for title of the book underscores the authors’ conviction about the central role of these drives to human nature and society.)

Having established the characteristics and importance of the four drives, Lawrence and Nohria go on demonstrate how these drives produce and affect social contracts, including marriage and social groups such as organizations. The now well-supported evolutionary view of parental investment is presented relatively intact.

The authors’ special interests become evident in their discussions of trade, technology, and the basis of economic relationships to a culture. For example, a chapter entitled “Human Nature and Organizational Life” focuses on the four drives as they play out in the workplace. Through lengthy discussions based on Hewlett-Packard, GM, and the “Japanese challenge”, advice for restructuring organizations is offered.

In some of their explanations, the authors’ rather non-technical approach is refreshing. For example, to explain the tenacity of wrong beliefs (such as that of a flat earth), they note that “Human brains seem to be built in a way that makes it difficult to displace prior ideas” (p. 209). Their view is that the drive to defend kicks in to protect the status quo, even when it involves wrong beliefs.

In the final chapter of this quite readable book, the authors seek to demonstrate the broader consequences of the four drives, which operate at the individual level but have profound effects on large-scale economic systems. The cataclysmic economic deterioration in the former eastern bloc countries following the collapse of the Soviet Union is compared to a similar, but wholly successful, restructuring campaign in Ireland at about the same time.

The difference between economic success and failure, and between a hopeful and dismal future for the world, may lie in how well we understand and accommodate our basic drives, the authors insist.

For readers who are unconvinced that human nature or behavior can be broadly understood in the framework of these four drives, the authors offer suggestions for research. And they note, “In spite of the record of human progress ... the hazards from the dark side of human nature are massive and real” (p. 282). While some readers might think their position simplistic, few would argue against the authors’ assertion that fine-tuning the balance between the four drives would afford us a better chance to successfully manage the risks of an increasingly complex

and dangerous world. “The challenge is to find a course forward that fulfils all of our basic drives in some creative, balanced way....The way forward must be to use the best side of each drive to check the dark, excessive potential of human nature” (p. 283).

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