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Book Review: The Evolved Nest: Nature's Way of Raising Children and Creating Connected Communities

By Michele A. Fouts

The Evolved Nest: Nature's Way of Raising Children and Creating Connected Communities by Darcia Narvaez and G. A. Bradshaw, takes readers on a journey through early childhood development utilizing storytelling and empirical scientific findings. This book begs us to reconsider how we raise our young. Readers interested in both human and nonhuman developmental psychology may find this book insightful and provocative, however, the connections between humans and other Animals¹ are not always clear. Despite this disjunction, readers will likely find themselves mobilized to make substantial changes in the way they relate to themselves and other living beings.

This work builds upon the authors' impressive academic credentials (see "About the Authors", Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023, p. 233). Narvaez utilizes an interdisciplinary background, with a doctoral degree in psychology, to study morality (among many other related topics) while integrating anthropology, neuroscience and education. While Bradshaw, with doctoral degrees in both psychology and ecology, has extensively studied the "psychology" of nonhuman animals, such as the effects of trauma in Elephants (Bradshaw, 2010), and works to counter myths about commonly feared species, like Grizzly Bears (Bradshaw, 2017)

Modern Living: "Traumatogenic"

Narvaez and Bradshaw (2023) argue that humans have evolved to expect certain conditions and these are, in many ways, similar to the conditions in which nonhuman animals also raise their young.

"Evolved nests are developmental systems tailored to nurture psychological, social, and physical needs in a species-unique manner" (p. 2).

Essentially, the "evolved nest" (for humans) contains the time-tested ingredients necessary to raise a (human) newborn and ensure their successful adult membership in a well-functioning multispecies community. It provides *nested care*, which includes on- demand (and lengthy) breastfeeding, frequent loving touch, pleasant and responsive interactions with multiple carers, free play, connection with Nature, embodied learning and regular participation in healing practices.

In contrast to these evolved, expected patterns, modern industrialized human living minimizes and, in many cases, prevents such practices. Carers and offspring are stressed by economic pressures, social isolation, technological overstimulation and hyper valuation of individualism. A "(de)evolved nest," perhaps. Common contemporary practices, such as medicalized birthing, scheduled feeding and sleeping, physical separation by way of cribs, strollers and daycare, overly structured "play," "ipading," and an early emphasis on academic learning, are collectively referred

¹ Note: In keeping with the authors' style, which gives preference to "treat[ing] species' differences like those of cultures (Bradshaw, 2017), "Nature" and names of animal species are capitalized (see p. xvii; Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023)

to by the authors as *unnested care*. As Gabor Maté (who wrote the forward) has long-argued, modern living is traumatogenic (Maté & Maté, 2022).

As a result, we are isolated from our own true nature as human beings, separated from a feeling of kinship with other fellow humans and the larger (nonhuman) world as a whole. We are left to suffer anxiety, depression, grandiosity and violence, all as a (mis)seemingly “separate, isolated” individual being.

“Western, Nature-dissociated thinking that has generated widespread social and ecological malaise is not sufficient to solve the climate crisis and mass extinctions, nor to heal human and nonhuman hearts, minds, and bodies. By adopting and cultivating Nature-based practices that promote thriving in individuals and communities, we all can reknit and revive the vitality of our planet” (Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023, p. 165).

The Evolved Nest

The Evolved Nest draws from an impressive breadth of research primarily from the fields of interpersonal neurobiology (for seminal work, see Siegel, 2020), cognitive affective neuroscience, evolutionary biology, animal behavior, and Native Science. It offers a valuable addition to trans-species psychology (see Adams, 2018), a body of work that aims to push psychology to embrace the commonalities across human and nonhuman species, rather than separating “human psychology” from “animal (nonhuman) behavior” (i.e., ethology).

“Trans-species psychology ... looks at myriad processes, feelings, and states that make up what we call psyche through a single, species-inclusive lens, instead of parsing off humans from all other creatures” (Bradshaw, 2009).

This book, and many other contemporary voices, are arguing for an end to “[the] ‘dominant culture’: the Westernized world view that considers humans as separate from, superior to, and having self-proclaimed dominion over nature” (Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023, p. xviii)

Overview

The Evolved Nest begins by paying homage to Jean Liedloff (1975) and her book the “Continuum Concept: In Search of Happiness Lost.” This book introduced many to a style of parenting that included extensive breastfeeding, baby wearing, and trusting a child’s natural curiosity and self-control to explore novel situations with little adult interference. Liedloff wrote about her observations of the Amazonian Ye’kuana. She marveled at their joyfulness and cooperative ways as they went about their daily activities. She concluded that their child rearing practices explained their social harmony and psychological well-being. Her work helped inspire the “natural” parenting movement (Bobel, 2004), influencing many parents to reject the notion that babies need to learn how to be independent through repeated experiences of frustration and isolation.

Beyond the introductory sections (and a final, scoping overview chapter to conclude), *The Evolved Nest* contains eight chapters, which are interwoven with research findings on human development, that present child-rearing stories from eight varying (nonhuman) species. These chapters include: Brown Bears (and the factors that support the optimal timing of pregnancy); African Elephants

(and accompaniment, or communal care); Sperm Whales (and breast feeding); Emperor Penguins (and shared care); Beavers (and free play); Amazon Parrots (and loving touch); Octopuses (and emotional intelligence); and Gray Wolves (and moral development). Readers are urged to see how the highlighted practices of these nonhuman carers benefit their nonhuman offspring and, subsequently, inform best-practices for young humans.

Mutual Accompaniment

As an example, in the third chapter, we learn about young African Elephants' need for constant companionship, or "mutual accompaniment," within social groups that contain multiple allomothers (carers other than the biological mother).

"Accompaniment is more than physical presence- or rather, physical presence is more than what meets the modern human eye. Accompaniment describes the commitment of one to support and journey with another, to put oneself in the space of mutual need and vulnerability with someone else" (Watkins, 2019, as cited in Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023, p.31).

Stories from the Sheldrick Wildlife Trust in Kenya illustrate the tragic suffering of orphaned young elephants, and how humans have learned to provide accompaniment to raise psychologically healthy elephants that can be successfully released. Here, Bradshaw draws on her extensive research documenting PTSD in Elephants (see Bradshaw, 2010). She elucidates the parallels between the need for young Elephants, and young humans, alike, to have multiple carers who are always emotionally and physically available (i.e., in "attuned accompaniment").

When such accompaniment is unavailable to young Elephants, the results can be fatal to both the Elephants and to other species. This point is dramatically conveyed through the story of the adolescent male Elephants, imported into wildlife parks in South Africa, who, without the guidance and company of older males, raped and killed Rhinoceroses.

"The stories of male Elephant trauma eerily echo those of human infants and young men, who also require extensive developmental support to reach healthy maturity" (Schore, 2017, as cited in Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023).

When such attuned accompaniment is repeatedly unavailable for human infants, like when primary caregivers are depressed or lack the physical and emotional support of communal care, infants are oft left with potentially confusing, unpredictable, and unsatisfying interactions (Frosch et al., 2021; Summers & Chazan-Cohen, 2012). Infant withdrawal and anxiety can result in long term neural and epigenetic changes, leaving the growing child more vulnerable to difficulties with self-regulation, memory and cognition (Center on the Developing Child, 2009).

"In short, how a child is treated is predictive of how they will treat the world ... Rather than being integrated in all aspects of a supportive community, most children's experiences involve routine stress, isolation, and disconnection" (Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023, p. 7).

Subsequently, as a result of this "mismatch" in childrearing (i.e., "evolved expectations" versus modern, contemporary practices), and *"in place of evolved nest inclusion, nurturance, and*

security, the unnested child experiences alienation, deprivation, and trauma, which often starts even prior to birth” (Maté & Maté, 2022, as cited in Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023, p. 7).

The Human Evolved Nest

The final chapter describes the essential ingredients for the human evolved nest, listing them in the following order: *a welcoming social climate; soothing perinatal experiences; extensive breastfeeding; nearly constant touch; accompanied care from mother and others; self-directed play; responsive relationships; Nature immersion; connected holism; and routine healing practices* (p.156). Storytelling about Animal families is used to elucidate and explain these, providing examples of what “nested” and “unnested” care might look in human caregiving.

For example, nearly constant and pleasant touch is supported through baby wearing and co-sleeping, yet is compromised by using strollers, baby swings, and cribs. Another example includes self-directed play, which is promoted by allowing children to play freely outdoors with multi-aged peers with minimal adult guidance and, conversely, is inhibited by structured activities, like organized sports and the use of screens.

The final two ingredients, *connected holism* and *routine healing practices*, might be the most abstract for readers. *Connected holism*, as informed by Indigenous worldviews, relates to kinship:

“Animal children, and children of human foraging communities, do not learn how to live and thrive from books. They experience life fully from observing, imitating, and being guided by community members through play and engagement (Rogoff, 2005; Rogoff & Lave, 1984). They learn in embodiment, with all their senses (Coopersmith & Leon, 1986; MacFarlane, 1975). This is another reason why it is important for children to learn about themselves in the mother of all- Nature- and understand what it means to be integral as a part of -not apart from- the landscape in which they live” (as cited in Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023, p. 160).

Connected holism, thus, develops through embodiment, which is a sense of self that connects thought, feeling, and physicality (rather than separating these as distinct modes and favoring one over the other). *Routine healing practices*, on the other hand, promote embodiment, mindful awareness, and bring communities together. The reason for their use is not unlike that of those Indigenous ceremonial customs used for physical, psychological, and spiritual healing. The authors suggest, as potential healing practices, communal dancing, drumming, and singing, as well as gardening and spending time in nature.

Criticism

Overall, the Evolved Nest makes a strong argument for rethinking how children should be raised and how we all, at any age, can begin to heal from individual and collective trauma.

“Nestedness is not just for children. We become fully human by “owning up to being animal, a creature of the Earth” (Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023, p. 165).

While most chapters draw clear parallels between nonhuman and human parenting practices, such as how Sperm Whales nurse on demand and young Beavers are cared for by elders (older siblings

and adults) and given ample opportunity for free play, other chapters are less clear. For example, the chapter on Octopuses makes the well supported case that emotions are vital for healthy development and that Cephalopods have exquisite emotional intelligence despite their neuroanatomical differences from mammals. However, the authors also acknowledge that Octopus mothers die after their eggs hatch, thus leaving them without postnatal nurturance. This stands in stark contrast with the overall theme of the book, which emphasizes the role of parental care as critical for the healthy development of offspring. Hence, readers may be left a bit confused as to how the development of emotional intelligence for octopuses can inform childrearing practices for humans.

Childrearing: Work / Play

If the authors had included another chapter to further synthesize childrearing practices across species, they might have devoted additional discussion to the various ways “work” and “play” are integrated into the daily routines of various cultures and species (human and non-human, alike). Cross-cultural research on patterns and themes in human children’s play show much variation between communities in terms of whether adults function as play partners or not and to what degree play activities are early attempts to imitate and master tasks typical for adults (Lansford, 2022). In typically Western Industrialized communities with formal schooling, parents are more likely to act as play partners and to segregate children from adult “work” (Coppens et al., 2018). “Play,” when not technology based, often consists of adult-engineered special activities that are designed to entertain children. Parents may then expect children to perform “joy” while they (the children) are being photographed and their “play” documented. “Work” (paid or not) is typically what parents do when their children aren’t with them or, if they are “together,” when the children are otherwise occupied by screens. In this model, children are not expected to make significant contributions to household or community functioning.

In contrast, for many non-Western parents, and especially for Indigenous communities, where formal schooling isn’t a central feature, a high value is placed on children’s contribution to “work” that benefits the group such as cleaning, cooking and caring for younger children (Rogoff & Mejia-Araez, 2022). However, “play” and “work” are not easily separated as distinct forms of activity (Coppens et al., 2018). “Work” can be performed playfully, and “play” often entails children imitating what they see the elders around them doing. When children are integrated, rather than segregated, from the daily tasks that adults must perform, they gain the opportunity to practice these tasks in ways that are developmentally appropriate. Thus, children learn their role in the collective community from an early age and know that they have a valuable contribution to make.

When examining the intersections of “play” and work” across Animal species, we can find parallels between Indigenous human communities and numerous Animal species. Across various Animal families, we see that the young are often allowed to play freely with each other and with

the elements in their natural environment (e.g., Beavers; Narvaez & Bradshaw, 2023). However, they are rarely entertained by, or expected to perform for, the adults (Fouts, in prep). While some Animal parents do play with their young, these parents spend much of their time doing adult “work” such as ensuring physical safety and procuring food (Fouts, in prep). They expect their young to follow, observe, and imitate them. Then, over time, before assuming full adult responsibilities and/or venturing off on their own, adults expect them to function more independently and contribute to the needs of the family group and broader community. This is not unlike the approach seen in many non-Western and Indigenous communities.

Could this integration of “play-” and “work-” related activity seen in both human and non-human families be another element of nested care that facilitates connected holism? Could it be that allowing self-directed free play in children, with little adult interference, *and* expecting them to act as apprentices in those typically adult-oriented tasks, facilitates a strong sense of purpose and belonging, thereby better preparing them to live in an interconnected society (see López-Fraire et al., 2024)? Narvaez and Bradshaw make a strong case for the value of free play in human psychological development. After all, play offers many benefits, such as creating the cognitive and socioemotional foundations that are necessary for future skills and abilities and relationships (Yogman et al., 2018). While encouraging more time for free play would arguably benefit human children, integrating children into the daily activities necessary for family functioning and expecting that they are capable and motivated to contribute is a topic worthy of further exploration.

Afterall, it is not just how children are treated that determines who they become. What children do and what they see others doing sets the stage for future interests, abilities, and priorities (Vygotsky, 1978). Hence, nested care must extend beyond a set of proscribed practices to embrace culturally relevant and dynamic values, expectations, and behaviors that, together, can promote interdependence and individual and collective resilience.

Contemporary Challenges

Despite all the evidence that these various practices encourage healthy development, it is likely that some readers may find the prescriptions for childrearing impossible to implement due to both individual and systemic barriers. For example, communal care is presented as critical; however, childcare centers, which are many families’ primary option for “allomothers,” are rightly critiqued by the authors for their subpar care and overemphasis on academic learning. Additionally, breastfeeding, while superior to formula, is still not widely supported by U.S. social norms and, further, economic pressures require many carers who want to breastfeed to work under circumstances that make it incredibly difficult, if not impossible, to do so.

Thus, implementing an “evolved nest” cannot rest solely on individual carers and families. It requires a paradigm shift across culture and society, including affecting change in multiple institutions and across governmental policy. For example, countries that provide extensive paid

parental leave generally have significantly higher breastfeeding rates compared to the U.S. (Bettinelli et al., 2024)

Another challenge is whether providing a child with an evolved nest will ultimately guarantee a resilient, peaceful and cooperative adult. It is likely that it will improve well-being but this tugs at the paradoxes of human nature. We humans are capable of incredible cooperation... and violence, too. Is *nestedness* enough to encourage our “bonobo-like” ethics? Or will some humans, under certain circumstances, inevitably display our more “chimpanzee-like” selves, using aggression to solve conflict?

Conclusion

Regardless of the false binary of human nature as either harmonious or antagonistic, since we are most likely both, depending on context, raising nested children with the greatest potential to flourish will require a sea change in modern society.

It is not realistic to expect primary caregivers, especially mothers, to provide everything for their children. Liedloff (1975) and other proponents of “natural parenting” are often criticized for placing the entire burden of care, and its subsequent outcomes, on individual mothers (Bobel, 2004). In today’s parenting climate, mothers are often at odds with each other over choices around birthing, feeding, sleeping, and educating their children, just to name a few hotly debated topics within the “mommy wars” (Faircloth, 2014).

If we are to collectively value and implement nested care, we humans must find ways to transform ourselves, our families, our communities, and our nations. No matter the distance between the current reality and the ideal potential, *The Evolved Nest* offers a road map that both individuals and institutions will benefit from embracing.



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