



Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create

Pascal Boyer

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A watershed book that masterfully integrates insights from evolutionary biology, genetics, psychology, economics, and more to explore the development and workings of human societies

“There is no good reason why human societies should not be described and explained with the same precision and success as the rest of nature.” Thus argues evolutionary psychologist Pascal Boyer in this uniquely innovative book.

Integrating recent insights from evolutionary biology, genetics, psychology, economics, and other fields, Boyer offers precise models of why humans engage in social behaviors such as forming families, tribes, and nations, or creating gender roles. In fascinating, thought-provoking passages, he explores questions such as, Why is there conflict between groups? Why do people believe low-value information such as rumors? Why are there religions? What is social justice? What explains morality? Boyer provides a new picture of cultural transmission that draws on the pragmatics of human communication, the constructive nature of memory in human brains, and human motivation for group formation and cooperation.

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From Reader Review Minds Make Societies: How Cognition Explains the World Humans Create for online ebook

Brian says

Fascinating concept of how culture and society evolve according to the same scientific principles used in biology. But I found it hard to digest and didn't understand much more of the concept after I finished it. Doubtless the fault is mine, but nevertheless.

Alex Zakharov says

In “Minds Make Societies” Pascal Boyer takes an approach similar to Jon Elster in “Explaining Social Behavior” – recognize from the start that social science is hard, and then use examples from various domains to shed light on aspects of observed behavior. Arguably, the ultimate goal of social science should be explanation, not prediction. To that effect Elster concentrated on identifying mechanisms, however imperfect, that lead to behavior and then categorized conditions under which a mechanism works or fails.

Elster’s book is fantastic, but he was wise enough to mostly restrict himself to individual behavior, and even there it can get hairy quite rapidly. Elster’s examples of collective behavior are almost exclusively reserved for illustrations of failures of explanatory framework.

Pascal Boyer shoots for society-level dynamics, so his starting point is group behavior - ballsy! In each chapter he reaches into a new area (religion, information, family, markets) and attempts an explanation in terms of often-subconscious cognitive computations which are bread and butter of cognitive anthropology.

Of course, Boyer is aware that nature, nurture, culture and evolution will all have an effect here, but the man is bold – he states that purely “cultural” explanations are unsatisfactory, as are purely “evolutionary” or “genetic” explanations – as such it is meaningless to talk about nature or culture!

Great, so Boyer saws off ‘nature’ and ‘nurture’ out of his vocabulary, and spends 300 pages redefining them on his own terms through cognitive computations. Yeah... Predictably a large chunk of the book is a disaster, despite the fact that many ideas are actually pretty good. So overall, what is interesting in the book is better covered elsewhere, while the original parts are a self-inflicted mess.

Olivier Asselin says

Fascinating in its scope, but often frustrating to read due to its unnecessarily complicated language.

David says

At first, it seemed as though the book was going to take a bio-cultural approach to cognition and the construction of reality, but in the end, although giving a nod to biology & evolution, it became just another

hymn to cultural constructionism.

If you are a fan of the cultural constructionist model you will enjoy this book, but if you feel the model too limited and occasionally dangerous (offering a disconnect between narrative and objective reality) this book will not be for you.

Rating: 3 out of 5 Stars

Emma Veitch says

Very quick comments. Interesting in particular the bits where Boyer talks about the purpose of making grandiose claims and the role of myth making in human societies... but a bit convoluted and he rarely gets down to making a central thesis or clearly stating his point.

Terence says

In *Minds Make Societies*, Boyer sets out to discuss six problems in light of research primarily in evolutionary biology and psychology.

[1] What is the root of conflict: “[W]e make sense of very diverse, occasionally paradoxical behaviors in terms of evolved capacities for coalition building and coalitional defense.... [T]he evolved systems trigger very powerful motivations... the outcomes of these unconscious computations take the form of pride, suspicion, rage, or hatred” (p. 65).

[2] What is information for: “[E]pistemic value is not the only factor that motivates humans to spread information. The need to be seen as a reliable source, the requirement to detect threat information, the urge to recruit others in collective action... are powerful factors. As they are not directly affected by the value of the information transmitted, junk culture is in some conditions both epistemically disastrous and evolutionarily advantageous” (p. 92).

[3] Why are there religions: “[R]esearch requires that we leave aside incoherent terms like religion.... [T]he fact that religions are central to the institutions of many large-scale societies does not imply that it is special in cognitive or evolutionary terms....

“[I]ncreased security favors indifference to religion, that some prosperity is required for spiritual interests, that coalitional recruitment is among the strongest forces in social interaction” (pp. 120, 124).

[4] What is the natural family: “[H]umans had a moderate but real amount of sexual competition. More important, long-term, intensive paternal investment is a characteristic of human pairs. This would predict a general amount of mate guarding in humans” (p. 156).

[5] How can societies be just: “Ownership intuitions result in a vigorous defense of what we extracted from the environment, and a robust motivation to help others guard what they extracted against intruders. Our free-rider detection system delivers a powerful desire to curb the activities of cheaters....” (p. 200).

[6] Can human minds understand society: “Obviously, the study of the political mind does not by itself translate into policy recommendations. But it could help us bypass our entrenched notions of how societies work, our folk sociology. It could also lead to a different vision of the political debate, one where we can use what we know of evolved human capacities and dispositions – ... the motivation to form coalitions, the disposition to form families, the propensity to strange beliefs, the urge to invest in kin and offspring, and the capacity for extensive cooperation” (p. 244).

Boyer is fully aware of the danger in using the findings of biology and psychology to justify social conventions and prejudices (e.g., patriarchy, racism, eugenics, economic models, among other things). He emphasizes that evolution is not destiny. The human animal is the product of myriad evolutionary pressures that generate both cooperative and selfish behaviors. We can be masters of our fate to the extent that we promote policies and institutions that foster our better natures.

I would recommend *Minds Make Societies*. It can be a dense read but, as Boyer laments, the issues can't be reduced to bullet points or mathematical formulae. Human motivations are complex, nearly opaque, but we are beginning to understand the “whys” of them. That these data can be (and have been) manipulated to justify some of the worst evils in human history is the great danger but not an inevitable one.

Kumar Raghavendra says

An interesting book that sets out to systematically identify the reason why many of our social practices have come into existence today - from religious affiliations to fairness in treating others. The narrative weaves between the make up of the human mind and how that has resulted in shaping our social structures today.

Morgan Blackledge says

Minds Make Societies is author Pascal Boyer's survey of findings from anthropology, cognitive science, evolutionary psychology (and oh so much much more) posited as the fundament for an evolutionarily driven science of sociology.

Henry ford said:

‘whether you think you can or can't, you're right’.

Applying this clever logic and turn of phrase to the special case of this book, I posit the following:

‘If you think you'd like or hate the book based on my previous description, you're right’.

Mara says

"Evolution designed..." is not a useful bi-gram. ?

Simon Lavoie says

[Extrait d'un compte-rendu soumis pour publication] Pascal Boyer s'est imposé au monde académique et à l'attention générale par une analyse cognitive des concepts surnaturels, liant leur émergence et leur attrait à une combinaison de violation modérée et de confirmation des réglages de mécanismes tels la détection d'agence, la lecture d'intention et l'échange social (Religion Explained: The Evolutionary Origins of Religious Thought). Il élargit à présent l'analyse à d'autres dimensions, approchées par voie de synthèse de recherches multidisciplinaires, qu'il présente comme autant de questions en quête d'une science sociale naturalisée : Quel est l'origine des conflits ethniques? Pourquoi succombons-nous aux rumeurs? Pourquoi, à partir d'une période récente, y a-t-il des religions ? Quelle est la famille naturelle? Comment une société peut-elle être juste ?

Ben says

Incredible perspective - skeptical, pragmatic, first principles thinking. More valuable as a demonstration of how to think than for any specific social insight (although there are some good ones in here).

Jukka Aakula says

Nice book on how the cognitive intuitive inference systems affect the society.

This is not a tutorial on cognitive science. Rather start with Boyers "Religion Explained" which is also more fun and easier to read,
