



Living with Our Genes: Why They Matter More Than You Think

Dean H. Hamer , Peter Copeland

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"A lucid, thought-provoking account of the case for 'nature' as a determinant of personality."

—Peter D. Kramer, Author of *Listening to Prozac* and *Should You Leave?*

Nowhere is the nature-nuture controversy being more arduously tested than in the labs of world-renowned molecular scientist Dean Hamer, whose cutting-edge research has indisputably linked specific genes to behavioral traits, such as anxiety, thrill-seeking, and homosexuality. The culmination of that research is this provocative book, *Living with Our Genes*. In it, Dr. Hamer reveals that much of our behavior—how much we eat and weigh, whether we drink or use drugs, how often we have sex—is heavily influenced by genes. His findings help explain why one brother becomes a Wall Street trader, while his sibling remains content as a librarian, or why some people like to bungee-jump, while others prefer Scrabble. Dr. Hamer also sheds light on some of the most compelling and vexing aspects of personality, such as shyness, aggression, depression, and intelligence.

In the tradition of the bestselling book *Listening to Prozac*, *Living with Our Genes* is the first comprehensive investigation of the crucial link between our DNA and our behavior.

"Compulsive reading, reminiscent of Jared Diamond, from a scientist who knows his stuff and communicates it well."

—*Kirkus Reviews*

"A pioneer in the field of molecular psychology, Hamer is exploring the role genes play in governing the very core of our individuality. Accessible...provocative."

—*Time*

"Absolutely terrific! I couldn't put it down."

—Professor Robert Plomin, Social, Genetic & Developmental Psychiatry Research Center, Institute of Psychiatry

Living with Our Genes: Why They Matter More Than You Think Details

Date : Published July 27th 2011 by Anchor (first published 1998)

ISBN : 9780385485845

Author : Dean H. Hamer , Peter Copeland

Format : Paperback 368 pages

Genre : Nonfiction, Science, Psychology, Biology

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Ron says

An extremely disappointing book that places far more importance on nature (genes) than nurture (environment) and wildly suggests that the decoding of the genome is the greatest boon mankind will ever receive, capable of curing all human ills, extending life and bringing an end to suffering. There are many more balanced and interesting books on the topic of genetics since this was published.

Valerie says

I feel like I got a broad sense of how genes play into nearly every aspect of human behavior, personality, health, etc. but there wasn't much concrete facts or info to remember as he often would imply something had a big effect then cite another study that discounted that effect.

I also felt nervous reading a science book from 1998.

Quinn Forrester-Wamsley says

This book contained a great amount of new and intriguing information. I was able to skim through or pass some sections because I had already learned about them in my psychology course, so that was reassuring since the information could be validated. However, I felt that even though the book was focused on the genetic perspective, it still included environmental/social explanations, but I wish there could have been more. A few areas seemed a little one-sided, but I did appreciate that some topics were left open simply because an answer has not been discovered yet. Lastly, the way topics were introduced allowed me to stay engaged and continue to read because each chapter began with a story of an individual as an example, and then moved into more scientific explanations.

Sheila Woofter says

Quite an interesting book about some of the research into the effect of genes on many parts of our personality and character: Thrills, worry, anger, addiction, sexuality, thinking, hunger, and aging. It was written in 1998, so I wish he would write another that tells us what further research has found.

Alexis says

AWESOME BOOK!!!! An honest look at the nature vs. nurture debate. The author challenges stereotypes; from intelligence within races to obesity. I appreciate all the work the author put into this book. I can see that the author took the time to really study the nature vs. nurture debate using facts and not opinion. Which in

our culture can be extremely convoluted.

Jennifer says

i picked this up from the library when i was wanting to read the book about gays but it was checked out.

I don't like it so much but i have only read about a chapter. Seems really dumbed/watered down. I'm worried it won't contain any science.

I gave up on this one. returned to the library

Elizabeth says

I read this as part of my AP Psychology class in high school. I found it very interesting and still think about what I read, even 10 years later. I may even reread it.

Susi says

I had to read this for my BioPolitics class in conjunction with a law book (court cases, journal articles, etc.) and newspaper articles. It provides a really good, lay-person's explanation of the scientific perspective of how genetics influence behavior. Hamer works for the NIH as a biochemist and thus gives a very scientifically-sound description. A good read for anyone who wants to know to what extent their genes affect their anxiety, weight, personality, aging, and aggression.

Paul Magnussen says

I'll try to keep this relatively short.

This book certainly contains a lot of interesting and accurate information, albeit buried amid anecdotes that don't really prove anything.

However, I found some aspects of it to be quite misleading; in particular, a tendency to cite studies that support the authors' view and omit all mention of other studies indicating the contrary.

Most egregious is the chapter on 'Thinking', which contains many straw men. A couple of examples will have to suffice:

On p. 217 we read '[IQ tests] are also culturally biased; even the smartest English speaker is going to fail a test in Chinese.' But no tester would assert anything different; tests in English are designed for English-speakers, and that capacity they perform their function.

Indeed, no test can be entirely culture-free: to quote Arthur Jensen:

‘Obviously, the wider the multidimensional cultural difference, the more complex and intractable is the problem of cross-cultural testing. Constructing a single test that maintains all its essential psychometric properties when administered to Arctic Eskimos and Kalahari Bushmen may or may not be possible [...]’ (1, p.636)

On the other hand, there are culture-*reduced* tests, such as Raven’s Progressive Matrices, which ‘have at least shown *equal* average scores for groups of people of remotely different cultures and unequal scores of people of people of the same culture and high loads on a “fluid” *g* factor *within* two or more different cultures’ (ibid).

Even worse are the assertions about the 1994 book *The Bell Curve* by Charles Murray and Richard Herrnstein. ‘They began with two facts: individual differences in IQ scores are substantially heritable and race is heritable. From there, they deduced that racial differences in IQ scores must also be genetic.’ (p.224)

This is completely false (notice that there are no quotation marks and no reference): what H. & M. actually say is:

‘The debate about whether and how much genes and environment have to do with ethnic differences remains unresolved.’ (2, p.270)

Neither do they say, as the present authors seem to imply (p.226): ‘if IQ is genetically fixed at birth, why should society bother with Head Start or other programs to help black children? If they aren't going to get smarter, why throw good money at bad genes?’. They *do* say:

‘[E]very serious attempt to assess the impact of Head Start on intelligence has found fade-out. [...] To this point, no lasting improvements in intelligence have ever been validated with *any* Head Start program. Many of the commentators who praise Head Start value its family counseling and public health benefits, while granting that it does not raise the intelligence of the children.’ (2, pp.403–404).

In short, despite the first author’s eminence, I find this book to be untrustworthy, which alone makes me disinclined to read anything else by him.

References

- 1) Jensen, A.R. (1980). *Bias in Mental Testing*. Free Press (ISBN 0-02-916430-3)
 - 2) Herrnstein & Murray (1994). *The Bell Curve: Intelligence and Class Structure in American Life*. Free Press (ISBN 0-02-914673-9)
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Randy says

This book is chock full of examples to pit nature versus nurture. I still remember being convinced for a long while after reading this that we have very little control over our behaviors per our genetic predispositions. They take many cases of identical twins separated at birth and compare their outcomes later in life; you know, the obvious.

Erik says

I fully believed that this book was onto something, utilizing tests between twins and adopted children. But then I went and got psychotherapy. One opinion prescribed me psychoactive medication. Another suggested social integration tactics without the drugs. I asked the latter psychologist if anxious and depressed people have more sex. This book suggested yes...she stated no...impulsive people have more sex. Compulsion seems to tie into anxiety, but it's sort of a side-effect for some and not for all. It probably factors into thrill seeking and addiction as well. So then you have to dissect anxiety/depression/ADD, and whatever else is integrated with that aspect of temperament. This book discusses temperaments and doesn't really go into personality disorders. In fact, I think in an offhand way it asserts that personality disorders aren't disorders at all...they're temperaments that have neglected character development. But does that really explain wrist slashing, bulimia, serial killing, and so on?

For me, this book just scratches the surface, and the human mind is more complex and will require supplemental reading. I wouldn't read this book as incontrovertible evidence about behavior, since behavior is so nuanced. I would really need to get a breakdown of behavioral disorder and where they fall underneath the temperament umbrella. Parts of the scientific community are at odd ends with each other, and the sociology/psychology debate continues. It felt like a relief to see how responsible neurotransmitters are for behavior, however I think willpower is underrated. Chaos theory just about renders any determinism incomplete. It seems obvious that personality traits run in families, but coping strategies are probably something learned. I still feel like a lot of people have more control over their environment than they think. Statistical analysis can only predict things. It's not necessarily a verdict. That said, this is a worthwhile, entertaining read, despite the rapid changes in science that have probably occurred since it was written.

Marilyn says

If you've always suspected that nature wins over nurture most often, then this is the book for you. It shows how genes affect our anxiety, weight, personality, aging, and aggression. I used to puzzle over how often relatives told me my looks and mannerisms matched those of my maternal mother, although I barely knew her. Now I know why.

Larisa Huiras says

I have to read this book for a lower division general biology class that I am taking to fill up my schedule. I am actually about to graduate with a degree in biological anthropology so nothing in this book was much of a surprise to me.

HOWEVER, I think everyone should read this book. I think science is so important and it seems that a lot of people don't care about it because they don't understand it. *Living With Our Genes* (although probably a bit dated by now on some topics), is a great introduction to understanding genetics and human behaviors. The authors do a wonderful job at explaining things so that anyone can understand it even if they haven't been exposed to information like it before.

Highly recommended to everyone, especially people who don't know much about science. I think it could be a great book to get someone interested.

Quietgirl255 says

An interesting read about various human "conditions" and the genes that may play a role in their occurrence. I wanted to like this book more but I found it a very uneven read. It covers the areas as Thrills, Worry, Anger, Addition, Sex, Thinking, Hunger, and Aging.

At times it felt like reading an undergraduate thesis paper. Each section would start off with a little vignette about a "condition" then proceed into various studies about genes that may be related/the cause of the condition. This author seemed to have a love of twin studies and wanted to repetitively cite numerous twin studies for every case. At times the writing was so simplistic a child could comprehend this, at other times my background in biology seemed necessary to understand it. At times I found myself glossing over parts...like wow here's another synopsis of several scientific papers just kind of mashed together in a row to make it sound more impressive than it really is.

But to be fair if one had no knowledge that genes could play a role in many aspects for the human "condition" especially things we view as emotional issues (and frankly many people don't) then in some ways it could be a good introductory food for thought, although there are probably better written books out there.
