



# Book review: Comprehensive evolutionary perspective on family and parenting

HANNU LEHTI

Academy Research Fellow  
Invest Research Flagship Center,  
University of Turku

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Traditionally, parent–child interaction in family studies has been viewed from a social perspective without considering evolutionary adaptations. However, as *The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology and Parenting* shows, including an evolutionary perspective can help to interpret and even predict parental and child interactional behaviour, often more effectively than theories based solely on social (proximate) levels. Human psychology plays a crucial role in parental behaviour. The family institution as well as traits associated with parenting have evolved via natural selection to ensure the survival of offspring. These traits can arguably be considered the most important mechanisms in humans to regulate and foster child development and further reproduction success.

The evolutionary psychology of parenting does not discard theories based on social interaction. Instead, it combines these approaches by integrating ultimate evolutionary explanations into the purely social developmental psychology models of parenting. Consequently, evolutionary family research can provide a more robust grasp of parent-child interaction. Importantly, the book emphasises that attributing some behaviours to evolutionary adaptations does not denote genetic determinism. It underlines that evolutionary psychological theories rather add ultimate (evolutionary) explanations to the parent-child interaction.

The book includes in total 21 individual chapters, which are divided into three parts. The first part deals with the foundations of parenting (chapters 1–8) introducing the evolutionary perspective in child development by integrating human life history theory and attachment theory. The opening chapter presents general theories such as natural selection, life history theory, and psychosocial acceleration theory as well as methodologies such as experimental, observational design and family/behavioural genetics models.

The psychosocial acceleration model's fundamental premise is that early childhood experiences provide salient cues to children about the safety and predictability of the environment where they live. Over time fast or slow reproductive strategies – indicating

childbearing pace, pubertal timing, and sexual development – build on early childhood experiences. The other chapters of the first part are based mainly on this model. However, chapter 7 explains how political preferences are associated with becoming parents. Because parenting is mainly an allocation of scarce resources to the offspring that secures the children's survival and safety, parents may adopt more conservative attitudes after childbearing. This presents an intriguing hypothesis on the formation of political attitudes, which has not been considered in the social sciences before.

Part two focuses on maternal and paternal behaviour while leaning mainly on parental investment theory (Trivers, 1972) and life history theory (Del Giudice et al., 2015). The section discusses particularly why mothers are the primary caretakers of children. Chapter 14 explores the difference in maternal parenting strategies in raising daughters versus sons, covering, for example, the Trivers-Williard hypothesis (Trivers & Willard, 1973). This hypothesis states that mothers in good conditions tend to invest more resources in male than female offspring because the reproduction success of males is more dependent on individual conditions and varies more than females. Hence, allocating greater resources to male offspring by mothers under favourable conditions, as opposed to mothers in less favourable conditions, could potentially influence the reproductive success of the male progeny. Chapters 15 and 16 study how paternal care differs across different cultures. This part also covers concepts such as the reproductive value of a child, fetal programming (in maternal stress), reproductive conflicts producing maternal aggression, maternal-adolescent conflict, and gene-environment correlations (rGE), among others.

The chapters in part three discuss alloparenting, a role taken on by, for example, grandparents, aunts, uncles, siblings, fathers, or other nonrelated individuals who help mothers with childcare. Chapter 17 introduces the evolutionary bases of alloparenting, reviewing scientific evidence from six monkey species. Chapter 18 examines why child adoption is so widespread, although such behaviour seems to contradict the assumptions of parental investment theory. According to the theory – all other factors being equal – parents are predicted to target investments in their biological children, who are genetically more similar, rather than other individuals. Chapters 19 and 20 review the roles of grandparents, aunts, and uncles as alloparents. Alloparenting is explained by inclusive fitness theory, which states that individuals can enhance their overall fitness not only by investing in their own offspring but also in other relatives thus enabling shared genes to be passed on to subsequent generations. For example, the grandmother hypothesis presents that menopause is an adaptation that evolved because grandmothers have higher fitness benefits to invest in their grandchildren than continue their reproduction. The chapters also introduce the Hamilton's rule (Hamilton, 1964), which suggests that genetic relatives provide more altruistic help than those more distantly related ones. The final chapter of part three examines an interesting topic, namely, facial, and bodily features that can be seen as a cue for parental abilities in mate choice.

Because the book consists of multiple individual chapters dealing with closely related themes, there is some repetition in the book. For example, life history theory is introduced in many chapters. On the other hand, the volume effectively serves as a reference book covering various individual topics, such as developmental and cultural perspectives as well as maternal, paternal, and alloparental investments. However, the content and

quality of the chapters vary; some chapters are more speculative than others, some are empirical studies, and some review the evidence of certain evolution-based hypotheses. Unfortunately, a few chapters containing empirical studies are rather poorly conducted and do not contribute any new knowledge. The chapters include low sample sizes, selective samples, and associative methods with scant control variables. The scientific evidence shows that the results from these kinds of biased studies tend to replicate poorly. Then again, in many chapters, authors ponder the possibilities of genetic confounding of prior studies between parenting and children's outcomes. One example that comes to my mind is that harsh parenting practices influencing children's life history strategies can be genetically confounded (Berg et al., 2021). The results of twin and sibling studies have cast doubt on the direct effects of parenting on some children's developmental outcomes (Harris, 2011; Grätz et al., 2022). Thus, it would have been nice to read in any chapters more about the empirical results of these genetically informed studies on parenting as well as about critical reviews/ perspectives of the field.

In many chapters, authors highlight the need for causal design in further studies on the evolutionary mechanisms in family behaviour. Empirical studies in evolutionary psychology – including those in this volume – have largely been conducted using non-causal correlational approaches. One avenue recommended in the book is that evolutionary psychological family research integrate with behavioural genetics to conduct a better causal analysis of the evolutionary mechanisms. I strongly agree with the recommendation, recognising the potential benefits that the integration could bring to the field of evolutionary psychology. One interesting question for instance that is presented in the book related to this integration would be to study whether parents target more resources toward offspring with healthier genes.

*The Oxford Handbook of Evolutionary Psychology and Parenting* is essential reading for scholars interested in family psychology. It can be particularly recommended for those who are working in the field of family studies but who are not yet familiar with the evolutionary framework. The book shows that an evolutionary approach is an efficient tool when formulating new hypotheses and applying theories. Moreover, the book can provide a deeper understanding of the somewhat mixed results found in social scientific family studies.

## References

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