

MEDIA REVIEW

Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives and Future

by Riane Eisler and Douglas P. Fry

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Reviewed by Frances Collins

Abstract

In *Nurturing Our Humanity*, Eisler and Fry address the neuroscientific-biological and social-relational aspects of brain development in human children, as well as the ways brain growth in children is either promoted or inhibited, depending upon the relative degrees of domination or partnership systems existing within the social structures of families and cultures. Fry brings an anthropological perspective covering human prehistory, history and present-day humans, while Eisler brings a dynamic social-relational and systems science perspective. The effect of joining these perspectives is the dawning of a deeper understanding from which a plan can be made and carried out to raise new and successive generations of kinder, more peaceful, creative and intelligent humans. *Nurturing Our Humanity* winds up with Eisler's plan, developed out of her own *Cultural Transformation Theory*. The plan calls for instilling partnership system values and practices into family cultures during earliest childhood, so that partnership values and practices can grow, endure, and replace domination values and practices in the family. As the family goes, so follows all the rest: schools, towns, cities, states, and nations.

Keywords: Partnership, Domination, Partnership-Domination Continuum, Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens, Cultural Transformation Theory, Neuroscience, Meta-awareness

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Meta-awareness, the ability to watch over one's awareness, is a prerequisite to recognizing and altering perceptual lenses; it is also required to solve human-created problems. In *Nurturing Our Humanity: How Domination and Partnership Shape Our Brains, Lives and Future*, Riane Eisler and Douglas P. Fry introduce a perceptual aid to meta-awareness, the Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens, which not only reveals specific relational patterns found in all cultures, throughout all of human prehistory and history, but also provides a guide to a cultural re-design for nurturing child and human development to create a more peaceful, caring, creative, prosperous, and sustainable humankind.

Eisler and Fry employ their Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens as an analytical tool, which indeed it is, since perspectives powerfully influence analytics. This lens is composed of the dynamic relations between biology, culture, domination systems, and partnership systems. The value of the perspectives revealed by this lens is inestimable; because it permits us to see what we can do to turn the hopes and dreams of a better future for all into a reality.

Eisler and Fry use the Biocultural Partnership-Domination Lens to illuminate interactive, structural components of culture: biology (especially neurobiology), the environment of family and existing culture, partnership systems, and domination systems. Of these four foundations, only biology is innate; the other three are human creations that affect biology, which in turn affects how the brain and personality develop, which affects behavior, which feeds back into the creative loop affecting biology, and so on. This feedback loop format may at first seem closed and impervious to change, yet it is open to the effects of human actions and creations, which are not immutable and can be changed or replaced with different actions and different creations.

As the authors write in the first chapter, "There is....nothing inevitable about the Apocalypse. We can change our course. It is our hope that this book will help support

this change, demonstrating that a more peaceful, equitable, and fulfilling way of life—a truly advanced humane society—is biologically possible and culturally attainable” (p. 15).

One human-made barrier to a kinder, sustainable life is the widely held belief that humans are naturally selfish, cruel, and violent. Eisler and Fry address this barrier by presenting evidence from science that caring, empathy, and loving connection are the natural, default settings for humans. This is significant, because the persistent belief in a selfish, cruel, and violent “human nature” is not only unfounded, but also precludes making an effort to improve the status quo.

A large part of *Nurturing Our Humanity* is devoted to the findings of neuroscientific research, in which recent advances in brain imaging technologies show that the quality of nurturing given to children affects brain growth, as well as the integration of neocortical functions with the rest of the brain. Children who do not receive appropriate, consistent, loving nurturing are less likely to develop empathy or the ability to control impulses. Moral and other forms of reasoning are also impaired.

Unfortunately, our culture has been organized around principles from the domination end of the partnership-domination continuum, with the result that many normative parenting practices inhibit brain growth and cause children to become angry, insecure, violent, impulsive adults.

When Riane Eisler recognized that all cultures are organized according to principles existing along a continuum between domination and partnership, she also outlined the basic principles of partnership systems and domination systems. All human societies, from prehistory to the present day are organized according to one of these two systems. Although no society operates purely on a partnership system or a domination system, every society is organized according to a place somewhere along a continuum between pure partnership and pure domination.

Partnership systems and domination systems influence brain development and behavior in different ways. These systems exist within and transcend all the conventional, oppositional categories, such as democracy vs socialism, northern hemisphere vs southern hemisphere, progressive vs conservative, religious vs secular, and so on. Partnership and domination systems are the bedrock upon which all cultures and social-relational systems are built, so there can be no sustained cultural change without change at the foundational level of these systems.

Nurturing Our Humanity provides the most comprehensive overview of these systems written to date. Briefly, cultures based on domination systems have these qualities:

- Rigid top-down rankings in the family, institutions, and politics
- Ranking of men over women
- Cultural acceptance of abuse and violence
- Belief that rankings maintained by violence or the threat of violence are natural and inevitable, as well as moral.

Cultures based on partnership systems have these qualities:

- Democratic, equalitarian structures in the family, institutions, and politics
- Equal partnership between men and women
- Valuing and keeping peaceful relations
- Beliefs about humanity that support empathic, respectful relations

Domination structures in families are characterized by authoritarian, punitive parenting, which inhibits the development of qualities that support individual wellbeing. This inhibition negatively affects the society as a whole by inculcating repressed rage that is then projected violently against outgroups, such as other genders, races, religions, etc.

In domination-structured families, women and children are controlled by violence or the threat of violence. ‘Teaching’ is accomplished by punishment, restriction, shaming, and shunning. Parents provide their children with an environment that not only inhibits the development of intelligence, empathy, and creativity, but also creates high levels of stress that undermine physical and mental health.

Partnership-oriented families are more peaceful, since parents are equal partners. Equal nurturing and opportunities are given to both boys and girls. Parents relate to each other and to their children with loving connection and respect. Teaching is accomplished by example, by loving touch, patient and respectful explanation, joint activities, and ethical modeling and guidance to support development of empathetic, considerate behavior. Partnership-oriented families provide children with the emotional and physical safety required for optimal brain growth and development, thus fostering intellectual exploration, creativity, flexibility, and empathy.

Co-author Douglas Fry contributes anthropological perspectives on foraging societies, partnership-oriented groups that existed in peace for millennia, much longer than people have lived in domination-oriented societies.

After discussing how societies could be transformed to create a more peaceful, equalitarian, prosperous, and sustainable existence, *Nurturing Our Humanity* turns to Riane Eisler’s Cultural Transformation Theory, which identifies four cornerstones that form and sustain cultures: child raising, gender socialization, economics, and narratives and language. Cultural transformation is made through changes to these four cornerstones.

Domination system cultures devalue or ignore anything to do with what these cultures designate as feminine, such as raising children. Therefore, they miss the obvious: that childhood experiences in families are the foundation of all other relations. National and

international relations are the result of family relations. Towns, cities, states, and nations operate like an aggregate of big and bigger families.

For centuries, progressive reformers have tried to introduce partnership ethics, values, and practices into social institutions and governments. While there has been some success, such as gradual improvements in the status of women in some parts of the world, domination systems continue to rebound with the rise of authoritarian regimes, curtailment of women's reproductive and other freedoms, warfare, and poverty. So far, well-intentioned efforts to improve the human condition have failed, because they have ignored the foundations of culture and instead focused on the results of culture, such as economics or politics, not the cause, which is the type and quality of the relations children experience within their families.

So, the way to move from a violent culture based on a domination system toward a more peaceful culture based on a partnership system is to replace domination system elements in the four cornerstones of culture with partnership system elements in families, and for parents to embody partnership values in their relationship with each other, with their children, their extended family, and everyone else.

According to Eisler, "We are not talking about building a perfect world, but we are not doomed to be insensitive, cruel, and destructive. On the contrary, neuroscience shows that empathy, caring, and creativity are core human traits. But whether these genetic possibilities are developed and expressed, or stunted and inhibited, largely depends on whether the cultures we grow up in orient to the domination or partnership end of the scale" (p. 280).

Nurturing Our Humanity provides a list of policies designed to instill partnership system ethics, values, and practices into each of the four cornerstones of culture. The book ends with a list of examples demonstrating how language channels thinking and how

the language, and hence the thinking, of domination systems and of partnership systems differ in intent, in meaning, and in the actions they inspire.

Nurturing Our Humanity is not just a theoretical book, even though the theoretical parts are soundly grounded in science. It is something brand new and invaluable - a viable, doable plan for making the cultural transformation that will help parents equip their children to grow into their innate potential, and to manifest the dream of a kinder, more peaceful and prosperous existence for all humankind and all other creatures living on a healthy, thriving planet Earth.

Frances Collins is a student, writer, and philanthropist working to change the thinking that drives beliefs and behaviors that are harmful to human and other lifeforms. She serves on the boards of the Center for Partnership Studies, The Dillon Fund, and the Clarence and Anne Dillon Dunwalke Trust.

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