



# *Our* Story

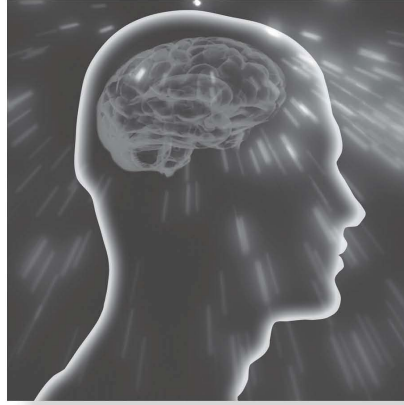
How Cultures Shaped People  
to Get Things Done

W. Penn Handwerker

# *Our* **Story**

*For the next generation*

Ashton, Maquah, Winston<sup>H</sup>, Tayamni, Chetan, Alexa, Elizabetta,  
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 **Routledge**  
Taylor & Francis Group  
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2015 by Left Coast Press, Inc.

Published 2016 by Routledge

2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

711 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10017, USA

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

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*Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data:*

Handwerker, W. Penn.

Our story : how cultures shaped people to get things done / W. Penn Handwerker.  
pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-59874-677-8 (hardback) -- ISBN 978-1-59874-678-5 (paperback) --

ISBN 978-1-59874-679-2 (institutional ebook)

1. Culture--Origin. 2. Social evolution. I. Title.

GN357.5.H363 2015

306--dc23

2014032134

ISBN 978-1-59874-677-8 hardback

ISBN 978-1-59874-678-5 paperback

# Contents

<i>Acknowledgments and Special Recognition</i>		7
Introduction:	Still Looking After All These Years ~ 150 Years! Drives You Crazy	9
<i>Part I</i>	<i>On Cultures</i>	
Chapter 1	Cultures Originate in Intelligent Minds	23
Chapter 2	Cultures Establish Moral Visions	34
Chapter 3	Morally Ordered Behavior Gives Cultures Agency	46
Chapter 4	Living Requires Many Cultures; Thriving Requires They Be Well-Designed	60
<i>Part II</i>	<i>On the Properties of Mind That Produce Agency</i>	
Chapter 5	Coercive Force Yields Morally Ordered Behavior	71
Chapter 6	Cognitive Coercion May Kill You Before You Get Anywhere	81
Chapter 7	Intelligence Makes for Disturbing Irony	91
Lessons Learned	Cultures Aren't Merely Curiosities and How "Others" Think and Act	109
<i>References</i>		121
<i>Index</i>		127
<i>About the Author</i>		128

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# Acknowledgments and Special Recognition

Homer Barnett and Clifford Geertz—for pointing out that cultures come from our minds;

Marvin Harris—for reminding me that humans cannot survive, much less evolve, unless they act;

W. P. Handwerker II and Joe Jorgensen—for illustrating the inseparability of truth and integrity and evidence;

Rose Jones, Catherine Fuentes, and Richard Wilson—for the challenge to precisely describe how cultures exercise coercive force;

Roy D'Andrade—for helping me to see that the former counted as an important challenge and for the language to both describe cultures more precisely and see more clearly how they work;

Russ Bernard—for pointing out key issues I left out the first time through; and

Willamette University c. 1962–1966, particularly Drs. Baker (English), Stillings (Political Science), Paulin (Art History), Rademaker (Sociology), and Tod Mikuriya (Oregon State Hospital), for insisting on truth-seeking through critical analysis of evidence, calling my attention to the issues addressed in this book, and challenging me to put the pieces together.

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# Introduction



## Still Looking After All These Years ~150 Years! Drives You Crazy

Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (1776) nicely rationalized what we know intuitively, that flourishing lives come from conscious, rational decisions.

We now know that this intuition is pure fantasy, told to us by an integral part of our brain that tells stories. We reason, certainly, but biases make it impossible to make a rational choice. Consciousness of which choice we made occurs after the fact. Ordinarily, moreover, we remain blissfully ignorant of the biases that direct the course of our lives.

True, rational choice theories provide powerful explanations in the social and behavioral sciences. These theories assume that the weighted average of preferences and the likelihood of their realization explain why people choose one thing over another. Real-world choices, however, depend heavily on availability heuristics, confirmation biases, evaluations based on likeness rather than likelihood, overestimates of the likelihood of rare events, and many forms of “irrelevant” information. If, for example, we frame a choice as a loss, we discount real risks; if we frame a choice as a gain, we exaggerate the same risks. Not only do real-world choices exhibit predictable “irrationalities,” rational choice theories cannot explain preference. Bueno de Mesquita's rational choice model, for example, achieves remarkably accurate predictions, but these depend on accurate empirical knowledge of decision-maker preferences, not a theory of preferences. Consequently, rational choice deterrence theories, which start from the familiar premise that strength deters violence and weakness elicits it, inconsistently identify deterrents and do not tell us what makes a threat credible. Empirical tests thus may provide only ambiguous support, and policies based on these theories rarely (if ever) work well

How, then, have we thrived? It took ~99,800 of the last 100,000 years to produce a human population of 1 billion. But we added 6 billion more in just 200 years. If we can't make conscious, rational decisions, how is this increase possible?

Simple. Human minds contain a set of coevolved mental mechanisms that work together to make it so. First, our minds produce imaginary things—speculative postulates that come out of our consciousness in the form a story told by what Michael Gazzaniga called our mind's Interpreter. If the story applies to the world around us, its implications tell us what we should expect of that world—for example, that the sun rises in the morning and sets in the evening, that living things depend on cells for their construction and operation, and that things that do nothing deteriorate and fall apart. If our Interpreter spins a story that applies to human agency, we call its implications *cultural norms*. These implications tell us what we should expect from the people we live among and expresses those expectations in a moral vision about what's right and what's not and how to respond to norm violations; for example, you should respect your parents and love your children and go to class on time.

The adaptive value of these cognitive mechanisms depends on the coevolution of a set of cognitive biases to reduce innovation-induced uncertainty, give emotional weights to experiences to differentiate opportunities from threats, and imbue shared moral visions with the power to force compliance with that vision. This set of cognitive biases yields codependencies that produce the teamwork that, for specific behavioral domains, we call *cultures*. Whereas individuals break easily, teams don't, and they achieve goals that individuals find elusive. Finally, evolved-choice frames give agency to individuals to try new ways when old ways yield dangerous effects. The outcome? A culture-creating and culture-dependent creature with a mind that generates a continual flow of innovations and uncertainties and depends for its well-being on cooperation with other like creatures. Hence, our preferences.

### *What's the Point?*

This book tells the story about how innovations in human minds created cultures and why the effects of cultures produced increasingly intense selection for the complementary cognitive mechanisms (like language and a whole host of cognitive biases that include wishful thinking, the confirmatory bias, learned helplessness, closure, heuristics, and choice frames) that were required to coevolve with intelligence to make cultures work effectively. Along the way, it explains the origins of morality, how and under which conditions we help or kill our neighbor or family member, and it provides some hints about how we may resolve conflict, minimize violence, and heal from the traumatic stress that will otherwise kill us.

This story's central finding? That nothing happens unless there's a culture to do it. Pick a goal: getting married, creating a secure retirement, putting food on your (literal or figurative) table, or receiving a bachelor's degree. World peace doesn't exist because

we haven't yet created a culture to produce it. Or how about more esoteric goals, like gay men's dependence on a culture to become gay. Doubtful? Read David Halperin's new (2012) book *How to Be Gay*.

Recognition of the power of cultures has become widespread. Here's a very short list of recent books about cultures and their effects:

- *Change the Culture, Change the Game* (2011), Roger Connors and Tom Smith
- *The Clash of the Cultures: Investment vs. Speculation* (2012), John C. Bogle
- *A New Culture of Learning* (2011), Douglas Thomas and John Seely Brown
- *Broken Promises* (2011), Edward C. Green
- *Carnage and Culture* (2001), Victor Davis Hanson
- *The Other Wes Moore: One Name, Two Fates* (2010), Wes Moore
- *Life at the Bottom: The Worldview That Makes the Underclass* (2001), Theodore Dalrymple

Whatever you wish to accomplish, you'll fail unless you participate in the right culture (or set of cultures). This may entail switching cultures or creating a new one, if an appropriate culture doesn't already exist. This concept applies, too, to all people, others as well as you. Global problems of all kinds— fighting, maiming, and killing of many kinds, health disparities, racism, drugs, poverty, and the environment, to name a few—originate in clashing cultural assumptions. The high incidence of rape on U.S. college campuses, for example, reflects conflict between cultural postulates bearing on which rights are unalienable and which are not and what counts as a sexual invitation. Prevailing arguments frame the problem correctly as conflict but wrongly as conflicts between individual agents (whether people, organizations, or countries). Because cultures act as coercive agents, individuals cannot change unless they *shift cultures or create a new one*. Effective resolutions thus depend on understanding the cultural foundations of conflict, how human minds create cultures and imbue them with the coercive force, and the circumstances in which individual agency forces a shift from one culture to another or creates a new one.

### *What Are These Things, Cultures?*

Much confusion surrounds the idea of culture. We see this as ambiguity and incomplete explanation in books like those listed above that explore the power of a culture. Edward B. Tylor gave us the first modern definition of what we call cultures in his 1871 book *Primitive Culture*. Tylor argued that cultures consist of stuff we learn from the people we live with that exhibit holistic, integrated properties. For Tylor, culture isn't just art, or families, or ways of making a living, or religion. Culture is all these. Culture is more than all these because the things that constitute it fit together. Change one part of a culture and you'll change other parts.

We've come to understand, however, that evolved properties of our mind tell us what to learn. Recognition that we can no longer distinguish meaningfully between learned and instinctive behavior set off a search for evolved specific neural architectures, or modules, that regulate human behavior. Evolutionary psychologists drew the conclusion that patterns of behavior emerged from a large number of built-in modes of mental processing. There's one for language learning, another for cheating detection, and others for mate selection, for different kinds of social attachments, and for all the other important domains of human activity. Jointly, these mental modules produce ecologically adaptive behavior for individuals.

This postulate ignores the commonplace observation that we learn nearly everything we know from other people. Ralph Linton made this point vividly in his 1936 book *The Study of Man*. He tells us how an ordinary American citizen, who dresses in clothes modeled after garments created by nomads of the Central Asian steppes, begins his day. He eats for breakfast a version of cereal and milk, a practice that originated in Southwest Asia and, perhaps, an egg from a species of bird domesticated in Southeast Asia together with strips of flesh from an animal domesticated in East Asia that had been salted and smoked by a process developed in northern Europe. Linton ends his commentary about how we transform into the banal components of our personal lives what originated as cultural curiosities from far-flung places and long-ago times—“cultural appropriation” according to some people, “diffusion” or “borrowing” to others—with this statement:

When our friend has finished eating he settles back to smoke, an American Indian habit, consuming a plant domesticated in Brazil in either a pipe, derived from the Indians of Virginia, or a cigarette, derived from Mexico. If he is hearty enough he may even attempt a cigar, transmitted to use from the Antilles by way of Spain. While smoking he reads the news of the day, imprinted in characters invented by the ancient Semites upon a material invented in China by a process invented in Germany. As he absorbs the accounts of foreign troubles he will, if he is a good conservative citizen, thank a Hebrew deity in an Indo-European language that he is 100% American. (1936: 327)

Domain-specific mental modules probably exist and, in one sense, it's probably true that “our skulls house a stone-aged mind” that produces adaptive behavior. Because individuals break easily, this can't be all the story. It can't even be a significant part of it. We thrive only when and to the extent that we coordinate our behavior with that of other people. Three well documented (and more general) mechanisms—intelligence, cognitive biases, and choice frames—allow us to see how minds take environmental information and turn them into things with agency.