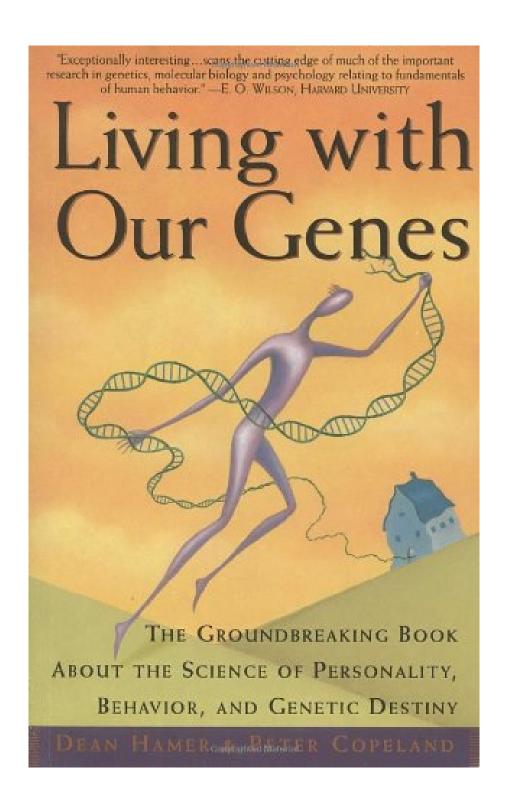


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A user's manual for understanding why we do the things we do, "Living With Our Genes" is the first comprehensive investigation of the crucial link between DNA and behavior.

Nowhere is the nature-nurture controversy being more arduously tested than in the labs of world-renowned molecular geneticist Dean Hamer, whose cutting-edge discoveries of specific genes linked to behavioral traits -- such as anxiety, thrill-seeking, and homosexuality -- prove without a doubt that we are in large part hardwired to behave the way we do. Hamer is one of a small group of researchers mapping the human personality, and his findings help, in part, to explain why one brother becomes a Wall Street trader while his sibling remains content as a librarian; why some people like to bungee-jump while others play Scrabble.

"Living With Our Genes" helps readers understand their particular genetic makeup and decipher the mysteries of genetically inherited behavioral traits. Hamer shows that much of our behavior -- how much we eat, weigh, drink, use drugs, and have sex -- is heavily influenced by genes. He 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 Listening to Prozac, this is a wonderfully anecdote-filled book that explains how we arrive at the idea of self in an ever-changing scientific landscape.

Sales Rank: #434224 in Books
Published on: 1999-02-16
Released on: 1999-02-16
Original language: English

• Number of items: 1

• Dimensions: 8.30" h x .70" w x 5.20" l, .59 pounds

• Binding: Paperback

• 368 pages

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9 of 9 people found the following review helpful.

This is a brilliant book

By Leib Gershon Mitchell

It's a little dated. For instance, they thought that there would be approximately 100,000 genes in the human genome when there actually turned out to only be 40,000. It's hard to say enough good things about this book, but the most important good points are:

- 1. An extremely light, easy and engaging read. I finished the whole thing in 1 day.
- 2. There is some much needed discussion of heritability, something that is very commonly misunderstood popularly.
- 3. A very cogent explanation of why genetic determinism is not sufficient to explain behavior.
- 4. Separation of the concepts of "correlation" and "causation." This is something that "everybody knows" are two separate things, but this author actually went into the details with his illustration of the "Chopstick Gene" that is found in Asian people. He also talks about what it means when you have two populations with fairly similar averages, which is: There will be plenty of overlap between the populations, especially if the "spread" is sufficiently high.
- 5. His handling of the genetic origins of intelligence are very sensitive and balanced, as well as his discussion of what IQ tests measure.
- 6. The experimental detail in this book is not overwhelming. It's just enough so that you'll get a sense of what is being discussed (if you're a dabbler in Biological Science).

7. Several very thorough discussions of genes as a basis for behavior. Homosexuality, impulse taking, etc.

15 of 15 people found the following review helpful.

Outstanding synopsis of our biological roots

By Stephen A. Haines

The refutation of Dean Hamer's finding the gene for homosexuality mustn't deter readers from this important work. Ever since E.O. Wilson's Sociobiology, the biological role of behaviour is being earnestly scrutinized. Calamity howlers may regret that the concept of "free will" isn't as absolute as they might like, but there is clearly some link between our chemistry and our actions. Hamer and Copeland have brought together a summary of the most recent research in this field.

Selecting a group of major behaviour areas, they relate how studies have shown correlations between genetics and personality. The focus is on comparative and correlated actions in twins. With increasing numbers of studies of twin behaviour in different environments being conducted around the world, the presentation is more than a little convincing. Most significantly, this book confronts us with questions that must be addressed. Hamer and Copeland don't attempt to claim that this book provides any final answers to the relationship of genes with our habits. They do ask us to review our thinking about the issue. It's vital work in the effort to find out who we are.

Hamer and Copeland remind us that we're biological creatures, not minds being carried around by bodies. For decades zoologists described animal activity as "instincts, secure in the belief that animals could be trained, but not taught. Genetic research has shown this outlook is misleading. Living With Our Genes is the flip side of that view in showing human activity has strong biological roots. They accomplish this without adopting the absolutist view exhibited by earlier researchers.

Going beyond simple statistics of behaviour patterns, they delve into the findings of geneticists who've identified specific gene expressions in the body. That our cells produce numerous chemical compounds is old news. A wide spectrum of pharmaceuticals is available to counteract or enhance a number of these chemical signals. What is only now coming to light, as Hamer and Copeland point out, is how these compounds work on the body and why.

In their chapter on worry they discuss the research on serotonin, the "genetic Prozac". It turns out that in one segment of our DNA, there are more or less copies of the serotonin transporter gene. Such genes are naturally inheritable, giving a segment of the population a trend toward anxiety. Anger, and its expression in violence is another area of common concern. The authors provide an extensive description of various forms of anger expression. They stress that anger can be controlled - genetic expression is important, but not an absolute. As with anxiety, serotonin and its by-products provided an important clue in the study of violence.

Molecular genetics has accomplished an incredible amount in the fifty years since the structure of DNA was revealed. Hamer's extensive bibliography is an indication of how much work has been achieved. Today the research is expanding into a new field called behavioural genetics. As one of the first understandable accounts of what's been and what needs to be done, it should be placed on your shelf alongside Matt Ridley's Genome.

4 of 4 people found the following review helpful.

The best book on genetic engineering

By nuenke@ix.netcom.com

Why They Matter More Than You Think by Dean Hammer and Peter Copeland (H&C) is a very interesting book that looks at the following character traits, or 'temperaments', that are influenced by genes: Emotional instinct, thrills, worry, anger, addiction, and sex. In addition they include intelligence and how genes are involved in its expression. It is important to note that diversity in personality or 'temperament' is controlled by the limbic system, which is shared by all animals and used by primates long before we acquired a higher intelligence. That is why as a social eugenicist I would argue that only intelligence needs to be raised to higher levels, while allowing the diversity of temperaments to coexist in a random manner, allowing everyone there own means of expressing themselves. That is, I would not try to eliminate shyness for

example, or increase novelty seeking, because there is no good reason to do so without a wealth of data on testing and showing that one temperament is always better than another. Intelligence however, is unique in that it is separate from the limbic system, rational, and is the primary difference between humans and all other animals. This again is not speciesism, it is just an observable fact, and does not make humans better or worse than other animals. But after over 100 years of research, intelligence has been shown to be always beneficial on average, and there is no reason whatsoever to want more diversity in intelligence, but rather to elevate everyone to the highest level of cognition possible. (see my review of Intelligence and Public Policy as well as the APA report.) I will return to this later. But for now it is important to state that until humans are all as intelligent as we would want them to become, without causing an unforeseen pathology or neurosis, social eugenics need only be concerned with raising IQ, and can afford to leave temperament alone until we have acquired a great deal more knowledge about human nature and where we want to go with our genetic capital. H&C discuss at length how temperament is influenced by genetics and the resulting brain chemistry that makes us all unique. I will hit upon just some of the points I personally found most interesting before returning to intelligence. For example, it has been found that "shyness, or being outgoing, is inherited at birth and lasts a lifetime." A condition I am sure many people have assumed was determined by the family environment. These differences are caused by "enzymes [that] make and degrade more than 300 brain chemicals that influence thinking, acting and feeling." What has been argued in the past with respect to intelligence however is how much alike people are genetically, and therefore the differences must be environmental. However, the differences in temperament, like intelligence, are caused by just 0.1% difference in genes between people, and there is only 1 to 2% difference in genes between humans and chimpanzees, so it is irrelevant how much we are all alike when a few genes can have such a profound impact on temperament and intelligence! Evolution has made sure that we are all different from each other in order to 'test and reproduce' over and over again in different environments so that the genes that are better at survival keep getting passed on in ever increasing numbers. Behavior genetics is the science that studies these differences, to determine what percentage of human traits are genetic, and as a science it is only about 30 years old, but advancing at a phenomenal pace. The most accurate tools so far for determining how much of any trait is inherited has been twin and adoption studies where both identical twins and siblings have been reared apart (see my review--journal of intelligence). Using numerous studies and mathematical methods, accurate estimates can be made of heritability. The results of these studies by Thomas J. Bouchard Jr. head of the Minnesota Twins Studies were shocking when they were first published in 1988, and then later replicated by other researchers. They showed clearly that genes do matter more than we had thought. Nature was winning out over nurture, "in fact, it is part of our nature to respond to nurture. . . . Giving children love and knowledge is as essential as giving them food, but at some point, parents must understand that children are already on a path beyond anyone's choosing. Children are who they are, and parents are better off getting to know their own children than trying to mold them into some ideal created out of thin air." Two researchers have divided up novelty seeking according to H&S. Robert Cloninger says it is made up of exploratory excitability, impulsiveness, extravagance, and disorderliness. According to Marvin Zuckerman it is made up of thrill and adventure seeking, experience seeking, boredom susceptibility, and disinhibition. But it is highly heritable (40%) and is an important trait in determining how we behave, but it is also hard to recognize. A novelty seeker may be promiscuous, go mountain climbing, or stalk the Internet heatedly debating various sensitive issues. But it is definitely not cognitive but comes from the limbic system. High scorers always need to take a deep breath before acting to allow the cerebral cortex, the planning part of the brain, to put the brakes on some careless or dangerous behavior. Of course, that is where intelligence comes in. We need both people who are high and low on novelty seeking, but intelligence will always help to control the more impulsive behaviors of the thrill seekers. Novelty seeking is also an important factor in marriage. Different levels can cause problems for mates. As H&S state, ". . . having different levels of novelty seeking is a frequent source of dissatisfaction in relationships and marriage. Behavioral geneticists call 'birds of a feather' by the fancier name 'assortative mating.' There is good evidence of assortative mating because of social attitudes, such as religious beliefs, tolerance for diversity, and political views, and to a lesser extent for

intelligence. However, for most personality traits there is no assortative mating: correlations of personality scores between spouses are usually close to zero. Novelty is an exception to this rule." Harm avoidance, neuroticism or emotional sensitivity is another major trait we share with other animals but is extremely important in our everyday lives and is highly heritable and hard to alter. It is responsible for giving us our outlook on life, and includes anxiety, fear, inhibition, shyness, depression, tiredness and hostility. From an evolutionary standpoint mild anxiety and depression are useful under certain circumstances, and is no doubt the reason it is so common. And not only for escaping from danger, but as H&S point ". . .a fretful, crying baby is more likely than a calm, quiet baby to attract a mother's attention and care. One study in Africa showed that infants with a 'difficult' disposition fared better than those with an 'easy' temperament during famine." And later, "Depressed or not, happy or sad, the gene doesn't care about how you feel. It's sole concern is to be passed on to the next generation." They also make and interesting point that happiness is fairly constant, according to studies of lottery winners who were no happier one year after winning large amounts of money. And this also makes evolutionary sense. Our genes don't care about our happiness but whether we are reproductive. So urges for wealth, greed, leading to attracting females for men and attracting wealthy men for females is always fundamental. An organism that all of a sudden finds complete contentment is no longer reproductively motivated. What this means is happiness to a large part is innate, and will not be changed that much by a better job, fame, wealth, or any of the other material things that we try to accumulate. (But I for one will keep trying, unable to shed my ego under the control of my selfish genes.) The genetic determination of sexual preferences for a long time was thought to be nurturing, but research into many cultures shows a revealing pattern of repeatability proving that it is much more genetically innate. Women are looking for commitment and resources (money) from men to help raise children, and men are looking for youth and beauty in women to sire healthy children. The two objectives are contradictory but the tensions set up can create a stable family for the nurturing of children. As H&S state, "the best thing a man can pull out of his pants is a big, thick wallet." But the most controversial question about sex is the heritability of gay genes. H&S indicate that the heritability of male homosexuality is about 50%, and "The best recent study suggests that female sexual identification is more a matter of environment than of heredity." I personally think that this issue needs a lot more research. As with intelligence, the prenatal environmental impact is very hard to test for using twin and adoption studies. And sexuality is determined by hormone chan

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