

THE HOLOCAUST AND BIOLOGICAL DETERMINISM: BEYOND "JUST BECAUSE"

Alexander W. Siegel
Carolyn L. Crowley
University of Houston

In the introduction to this important, well-written and passionate book, Richard Lerner recounts his grandmother's stories about the Holocaust. He tells of his own frustration as a child with her inability to explain how the Holocaust could have occurred—how so many of his family (and others) could have been terminated in the crematoria of the concentration camps—and her ultimate answer: "... just because." The question haunted him: "... my attempts to find a better answer have been a central part of my professional and scholarly career" (p. xvii). The book represents the author's lifelong struggle to understand and construct a theory of how it happened and his quest to go beyond his grandmother's answer of "just because."

It is an impressive piece of work, with a few—very human—flaws. He tries to unearth the roots of Nazi ideology and finds them in various writings stemming from the paradigm of biological determinism. In doing so, it's as if he's knitting a sweater. He starts with a pattern or ground plan (a linear connection between Konrad Lorenz and the Nazis, Sociobiology, Sexism and contemporary racism). While knitting, he revels in the intricate and rich and detailed designs in the sweater. As soon as he has worked a design, he knits more background color as quickly as he can until he gets to the next intricate design, on which he can lavish detail and style. Much of the passion is in the designs. The passion is also expressed in the desire for no loose ends. He snips, trims, tucks, and folds. Neatness counts ... in a sweater! But history isn't neat, linear, integrated, or compact. History has lots of loose ends. Lerner's skill in condensing and connecting material and ideas is impressive and lets him make clean, neat, and persuasive arguments. However, in order to produce such neat connections, he oversimplifies some—and simply ignores other—material. For example, his characterization of current research and theory focussing on biological inputs in development is misleading

Address correspondence to Alexander W. Siegel, Department of Psychology, University of Houston, Houston, TX 77204, USA.

in that some of the most recent, powerful and persuasive arguments go unmentioned. His characterization of contemporary behavioral genetics theory (subsumed under the paradigm of biological determinism) is too simplistic. Lerner, in effect, sets up a straw man. He argues against Plomin's and Scarr's positions in their articles published in the early 1970s in which they posit a "reaction range" of potential development set for individuals by their genetic inheritance; these fit more cleanly into Lerner's argument. With good reason, psychologists like Lerner are not persuaded by attempts to make strong statements based on simple genotype-environment correlations. However, in their more recent work, Plomin and Scarr are not making simple genotype-environment correlational statements. Rather, they argue that individuals select and construct their own environments based upon heritable characteristics.

In Chapters 2 and 3 Lerner manages to transport the reader not only to a different place and time, but to a different mindset. He allows us a glimpse into cultural myths and the growth of a movement (Nazism and the extension of eugenics in prewar Germany). He paints an exquisite picture of Lorenz, the flesh and blood person, full of European charm, and his times. Lerner here shows mastery of his craft, demonstrating impressive Steven-Gould-like mustering of evidence from creatively diverse sources.

In Chapter 3 the author also savages Lorenz, the ethologist and writer. While many of Lerner's attacks may be justified, the fevered pitch in which they are delivered frequently counteracts their effectiveness. At several points he constructs arguments from flimsy and insubstantial evidence, and his reasoning is self-contradictory. For example, Lerner first characterizes Lorenz's writings as following the clear lines of Nazi ideology: ". . . One may question, however, whether the similarities [between Lorenz's ideas and Nazi party ideology] Kalikow finds are as vague as Richards portrays" (p. 69). In contrast, a few lines later he characterizes Nazi ideology as incoherent and lacking any continuity: ". . . but there is little reason to expect that the hodgepodge of concepts, the opportunistic twisting of the motley set of ideas, that constitutes the corpus of Nazi ideology should show a neat and logical pattern of influence" (p. 69). His suggestions that (1) the link between Lorenz and Nazi ideology is clear and coherent, and (2) Nazi ideology is hodgepodge are inconsistent and the result of an annoying selective levelling and sharpening.

Lerner's plausible argument connecting Lorenz's writings to Nazi ideology is rendered less convincing by its tone of religious fervor, an anti-Nazi crusade, a holy war against biological determinism and anyone tainted by association with the paradigm. The bad guys all wear black hats. For example, in March of 1974, Vic Cox in an article in *Human Behavior* entitled "A Prize for the Goose Father" either misquoted from a 1940 article by Lorenz or there was a typographical error: "ethnic"

was substituted for “ethical.” In a (published, 1974) letter to the Editor to correct the error, Lorenz wrote:

... I beg you to realize that changing ethical into ethnical makes me appear a rabid racist, which I never was. I never believed in any ethnical superiority or inferiority of any group of human beings, though I strongly hold that ethical inferiority of individuals due to heredity or *bad upbringing* [italics ours] ... is indeed a reality, which has to be taken seriously. (p. 87)

In the very next paragraph Lerner claims that this letter clearly indicates that Lorenz held to the idea that a group of humans are inferior by virtue of their ethical heredity, and thus should be eliminated!

Although Lorenz thus insisted that he was not a racist, claiming that he had never believed there was a group of humans who by virtue of their *ethnical* heredity are inferior, he *did* believe in 1974, and in the Nazi period, that there was a group of humans who by virtue of their *ethical* heredity are inferior. It is this group—the moral imbeciles and dregs discussed in 1940—that should be eliminated, Lorenz believed. Such a fine conceptual distinction about who is and who is not to be the target of such ‘special treatment’ (to use the Nazi euphemism for extermination) provided little comfort to the men, women, and children who were sent to the gas chambers and crematoria. (pp. 87–88)

Things are black and white. Lorenz wears a black hat—no ifs, ands, or buts. Because he maintained the importance of genetic contributions to behavior, Lerner would have us conclude that *all* else is suspect.

In Chapter 4, Lerner discusses heritability and clarifies the limitations of the term as well as its misuse by psychologists. As Lerner aptly points out, heritability is not a measure of inheritance; it is a population statistic reflecting an estimate of genetic variability, not of commonality. The discussion is excellent. He borrows from Gould’s analogy of the “Just so stories” to describe the tautology of natural selection. He pinpoints the flaws adroitly in Dawkins’ (1976) notion of “the selfish gene.” In essence, the selfish gene frees us from moral constraints and justifies inequity. It is a subtle but dangerous extension of the biological determinist argument.

Lerner is at his best when he paints the historical pictures. Emotion is useful and perhaps essential in providing texture; paintings have impact because they contain “hot knowledge,” they embody Vygotskian spontaneous concepts. When he develops and tries to sustain arguments—“cold knowledge” embodied in scientific concepts—emotion gets in the way and he falters.

In Chapter 5, Lerner’s portrayals of the situations of women and blacks in Nazi Germany are superb—rich, pithy, depressing, full-blooded. In

discussing the importance of childbearing in the Aryan women's domestic role, Lerner unearths the Honor Cross of German Motherhood:

The Nazis' emphasis on women as genotype reproducers was so great that they gave awards—the Honor Cross of German Motherhood—to Aryan women who fulfilled their role as producers of new and National Socialist citizens—a bronze medal for having four children, a silver medal for six children, and a gold medal for eight children. (p. 132)

In contrast, in discussing the social treatment of blacks argued for by some biological deterministic theories, he focusses his scathing attacks on a most unworthy opponent. The ideas put forth by J. P. Rushton are so ludicrous that they hardly deserve notice, let alone lengthy treatment.

In addition to his talent for re-constructing the texture of an historical setting, Lerner is able to extract crucial aspects of that setting and reflect on them. He raises the uncomfortable question of moral responsibility in science, i.e., that science is not value-free, but rather, is an inherently moral (or immoral) activity, in a particularly poignant way.

Many of us lost family during the Holocaust. That it was an almost unimaginably horrible time and set of deeds is irrefutable. Nazi ideology, now, in 1993, is thought of and referred to as a compact, ruthless, cold, and consensually agreed upon body of uniform ideology and consistently heinous actions. But back then, in the 1920s, while the wisps of thought and doctrine were in the air, there was no such consensus about, or finely honed definition of, "Nazi ideology."

Chapters 6 and 7 are devoted to a presentation of developmental contextualism, Lerner's alternative to biological determinism, and its implications for social policy. While he argues persuasively for its power, this particular form of developmentally based systems theory isn't novel. Urie Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory (with its nested micro-, meso-, and macro-systems), metatheory (Pepper), systems theory (von Bertalanffy, Prigogine), and family systems theories (Minuchin) have all been around for a while. Lerner packages them nicely, and his contrast of developmental contextualism to deterministic paradigms is excellent, but it isn't new.

The proposed circumplex model, which has appeared in many of Lerner's recent papers, includes life, the universe, and everything. The reader should be warned a priori that it reflects a dispersive metaphor and stresses scope and comprehensiveness, rather than precision. Like the Health Belief Model that drives so much of the research in behavioral medicine (you need to at least mention it to get funded), the circumplex model is so inclusive that you can't possibly disagree with it; so vague, that virtually any research study can be conducted as long as you mention that ". . . we know that we are looking at one only small piece of a larger model . . ." in the discussion section.

Summary

“Just because” is profoundly unsatisfying for most of us, both as human beings and as scientists. However, once you have exhausted scientific method, theories and explanations, unless you choose to believe in a malevolent higher power, about the only remaining alternative is chance. In some profound way, the Holocaust was not rational. Then—and now—it makes no sense; it’s neither just nor fair. It reflects, in part, the randomness in our lives. We don’t want to believe—as Einstein could not—that God plays dice with the universe. We try desperately to extract meaning (that may not be there) or impose meaning on random events . . . and sometimes we can’t.

Lerner is a scientist, looking for clean, connected, rational lines in a tangled web of history that is only partially ordered (perhaps even “chaotic”). He’s “forcing.” We would feel better if it all fit neatly into a coherent picture. But complex human events are rarely, if ever, that simple. Perhaps the author should have let some of the loose ends remain as such.

While the book is not flawless, students of human behavior and the human condition need to read this important, scholarly work. In a curious way, Richard Lerner did not “choose” to write this book, nor did he “want” to write this book—Richard Lerner “needed” to write this book. He should be applauded for doing so.

REFERENCES

- Cox, V. (1974). A prize for the goose father. *Human Behavior*, March, 17–22.
Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Lorenz, K. (1974). Letter: Lorenz clarifies. *Human Behavior*, September, 6.