



'Evil Genes': Barbara Oakley delves into the science behind bad behavior

SCIENCE: Author Barbara Oakley delves into the biology behind bad behavior

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We've all run into people whose endearing charms camouflage a Machiavellian core. Even after we have been burned repeatedly, our good nature persuades us to give them the benefit of the doubt. They are, writes author Barbara Oakley, "successfully sinister."

How do some people get that way, and what allows them to survive and often rise to positions of leadership? Those are the central questions of Ms. Oakley's fascinating new book, *Evil Genes*.

As the title suggests, she believes that much of the explanation of those people's behavior can be found in their DNA. Of course, she writes, genes alone do not dictate behavior. Environment, experiences and circumstances can bring out the best or worst in any of us. Few people with a genetic predisposition toward sinister behavior turn out like Hitler, Stalin, Slobodan Milosevic or Mao Zedong.

Most live more ordinary lives, like Ms. Oakley's sister, Carolyn. Their successes turn out to be illusory, and their lives are marked by a trail of emotional scars on people who care about them. In the workplace, the successfully sinister generate turmoil and leave a trail of damaged careers in their professional wake.

Working in the notoriously Machiavellian halls of academe (she is a professor of biomedical engineering at Oakland University in Michigan), Ms. Oakley had plenty of opportunities to observe such people up close. But having Carolyn as a sister no doubt motivated her to explore those questions. Her research turned up an astonishing gap.

She writes about exploring the authoritative Medline database for information on the physiology and biochemistry of Machiavellianism. "Antisocial personality disorder" turns up 5,494 hits. "Borderline personality disorder" generates 3,090 "meaningful hits, including hundreds of imaging studies, genetic studies, drug studies, and so on."

However, she, continues, " ... if I type in 'malignant narcissist' – a term used by world-class psychiatrists ... to describe the kind of malevolent, yet high-functioning people I'm researching – I get nothing. Zero hits. *No medical studies whatsoever.*"

Though clear and lively in its prose, the book is not always easy reading, especially when it details brain physiology and function or the taxonomy of psychiatric and behavioral disorders. Ms. Oakley's research also draws on one untraditional source, diaries found after Carolyn's premature death.

The text is not linear, interspersing the various pieces of evidence and scientific background.

Evil Genes should be viewed as a jigsaw puzzle with some missing pieces. It produces an inviting picture with gaps to be filled by further research and speculation. That may be less than satisfying for some readers, but not for those who love science for the questions it opens more than the answers it finds.

Physicist Fred Bortz, www.fredbortz.com, speculates about alien DNA in Astrobiology, his newest book for young readers.

Evil Genes

Why Rome Fell, Hitler

Rose, Enron Failed,

and My Sister Stole

My Mother's Boyfriend

Barbara Oakley

(Prometheus, \$28.95)