

Darcia Narvaez on Maternal Gift Economy November 2020

Starts at 32:28

[slide: Mothering and Nested Care: The Core of Societal Health and Human Potential]



Hello, my name is Darcia Narvaez and I'm presenting a talk on Mothering and Nested Care: the Core of Societal Health and Human Potential.

[slide: Original Partnership Societies]

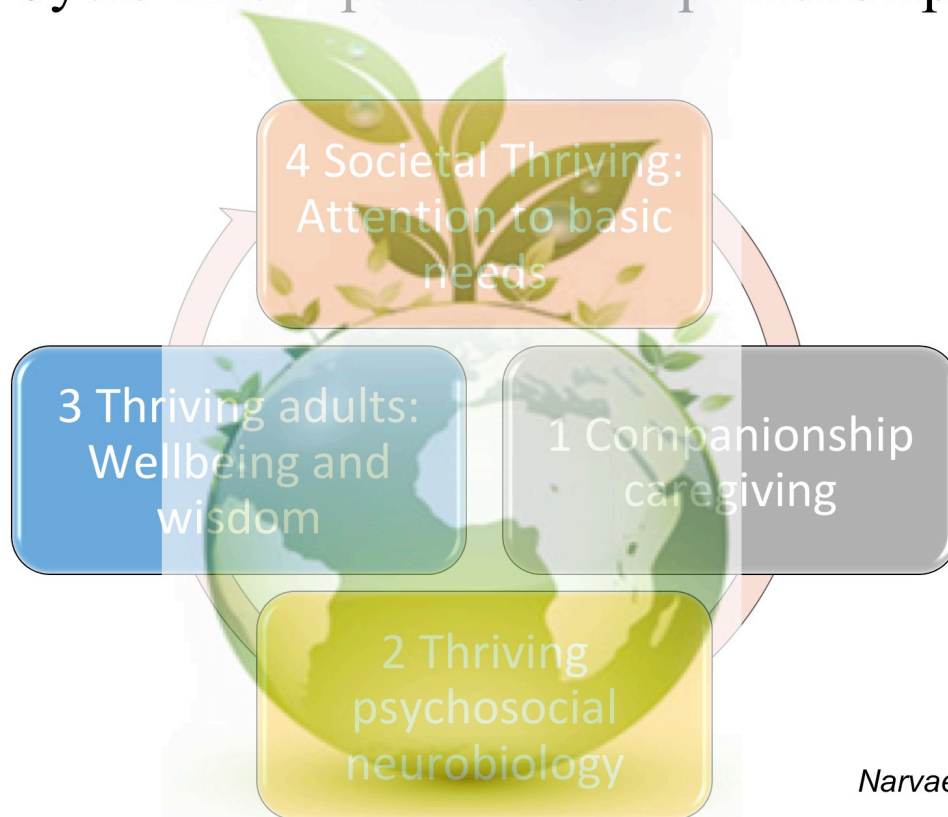


Small-band  
hunter-gatherers

**Original  
Partnership  
Societies**

My focus in my research is the baseline of our original partnership societies, small band hunter-gatherers, and we have converging evidence on what they were like.

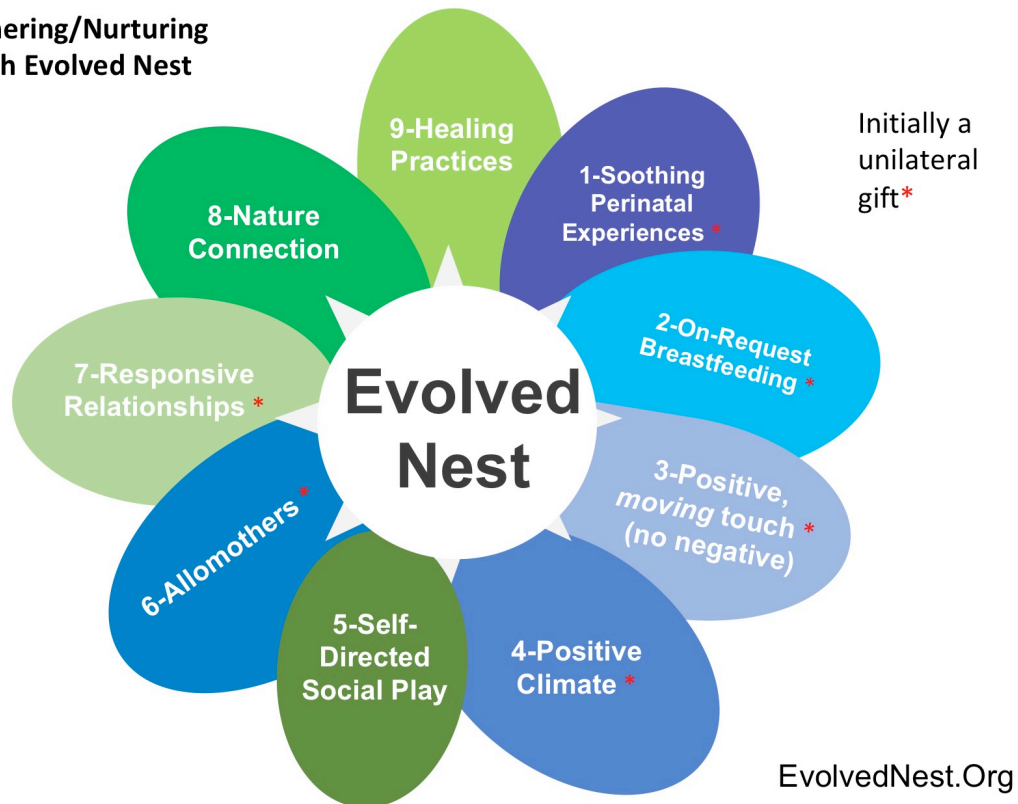
## Cycle of Cooperative Companionship



[slide: Cycle of Cooperative Companionship] In these societies they provide a cycle of what I call “co-operative companionship”. Number 1 they provide companionship caring to babies and children in those early years when our brains are being shaped by experience. And this leads to number 2, thriving individuals, psychosocial and neurobiologies, that work well, leading to Number 3, thriving adults who have well-being and wisdom and to Number 4, a societal thriving where attention to basic needs is common. And within this cycle there is also the attention to the natural world; it’s part of the community. So relational connection to the bio-community, to the local landscape placefulness, and leading to a kind of individual indigenous wisdom.

## What does Companionship Caregiving look like?

A: Mothering/Nurturing  
through Evolved Nest



[slide: What does Companionship Caregiving look like?] Now what does that early companionship look like? Number 1, we study the Evolved Nest in my lab. We do empirical data collection, as well as write theoretical papers, and we apply as well. We call it The Evolved Nest, the system of care we evolved as a species to provide our young and this includes various features that are initially a unilateral gift from mothers, primarily, and then other mothers as well, in community as a whole, the village. So you can see Number 1 there, soothing perinatal experiences, no separation of mom and baby, no painful procedures, on-request breast feeding for several years, which grows the brain body to optimal condition, grows the skull and jaw and so forth, and positive moving touch, number 3 there. So no negative touch, no corporal punishment, no coercion, positive welcoming climate, so the baby – the child feels like they belong, and that they have something to offer, Self-directed social play. Allomothers – that means other mothers, other parents, other villagers, the band members, who provide this kind of nested care, which includes number 7, responsive relationships attuned to the individuality, the kind of



having mutual responsiveness to emotions and communications. Babies are ready for this from birth. Innate nature connection, so immersion into the natural world, the local landscape, so you build that connection with the trees, the animals and plants and rivers and mountains in that vicinity, especially. And human practices, because humans make lots of mistakes and we take up resentments unless we have these routine human practices to let those things go and renew our relationships.



## What do Thriving Adults look like?

- Quiet Mind.** Presence, unbridled creativity based on sensory integration. Access to one's unique genius.
- Inner Happiness.** Childlike glee.
- Vitality.** Abundance of electricity in the body.
- Fully Alive.** Awareness of the sacredness of life. A sense of awe, respect, and wonder.
- Unconditional Listening.** Catches others' stories.
- Empathy.** Secure connection with others.
- Ecological attachment.** Relational respect for nature.
- Authentic Helpfulness.** Personal gifts & vision activated. Commitment to mentoring and "paying it forward."
- Love.** Demonstrates compassion and forgiveness.

*From Coyote's Guide (Jon Young et al)*

[slide: What do Thriving Adults look like?} So what does Number 2 look like? Thriving adults after you've had this nest? This is what it looks like. All around the world in these kinds of societies the ability to be emotionally present with a quiet mind, to be innerly happy, to display child-like glee, full of energy and vitality, fully alive and awareness, aware of the sacredness of life, unconditionally listening to others, having empathy and connection with others, ecological attachment, that relational respect for nature, for the rest of nature, authentic

helpfulness towards others and the ability to use one's gifts to mentor others and pay it forward, and then love, demonstration of compassion and forgiveness.



[slide: What Do Thriving Societies Look Like?] And what do these societies look like? Well, they're egalitarian, they're connected to the sacred web of life, they maintain harmony and balance, they have high autonomy, they can do as they will as individuals, but also high communalism, so their empathy is very much tailored to the well-being of others, and they spend most of their time here in positive social engagement sharing music and dances, song, laughter, again, no coercion, and their higher consciousness, their ability to abstract, is attentive to their relationships, so the web of life emotionally engaged in their ways of thinking and very little time is spent in self-protectionism, which I'll explain soon.

## Original Partnership Societies



- Social and ecological wealth
- Polysemy dominant
- Univocity rarely

EvolvedNest.org

[slide: Original Partnership Societies] So these original partnership societies, then, are full of social and ecological wealth, and in these societies polysemy is dominant and univocity is rarely used. So let me explain that.

# Polysemy: Dynamic Flow State

*Dominant in original societies*

- **Multiperspectivalism**
  - Ability to perceive entities from multiple changing perspectives, depending on the context and mood.
- **Transpersonalism**
  - Ability to merge with multiple others, human and non-human.
- **Result of *de-differentiation***
  - Finding *oneness* with others rather than difference and separation.
- **Fullness of Now:**
  - Focus on present moment, heavy with connection to others, including the other-than-human, to ancestors and other spiritual aspects of a dynamic, fluctuating universe.

Marvin Bram

[slide: Polysemy: Dynamic Flow State] Polysemy is this dynamic flow state that is dominant, where you're able to take multiple perspectives and perceive entities from multiple viewpoints and it shifts and depending on what's happening, your mood, it's transpersonalism, the ability to merge with multiple others, human and other than human. Dedifferentiation, then, is what is happening here as part of this flow state, finding oneness with others rather than differences and separation. And being fully in the Now, the present moment, happy with connections to others, feeling like, you know, there's so much going on, Oh my goodness, and you feel the dynamic fluctuating universe, the manifest and the unmanifest.



# Univocity: Problem solving thinking

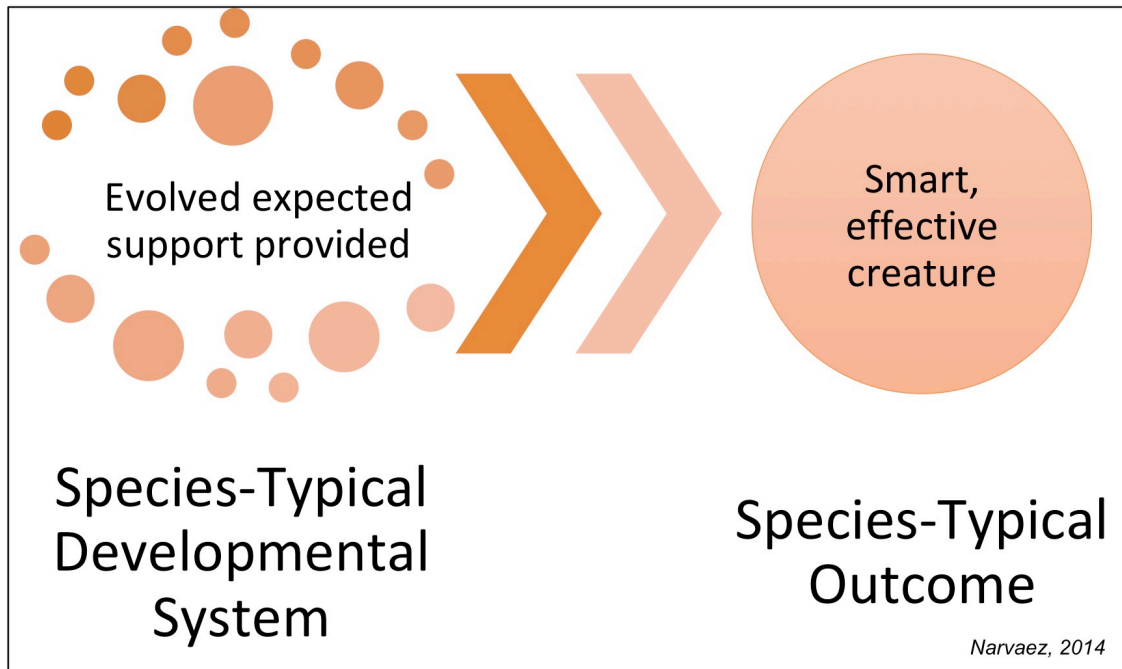
*Rare in original societies*

- **Linear, logical thinking**, assessing past and predicting future
- Used rarely among Original Societies
- Most time is spent in polysemy

Marvin Bram

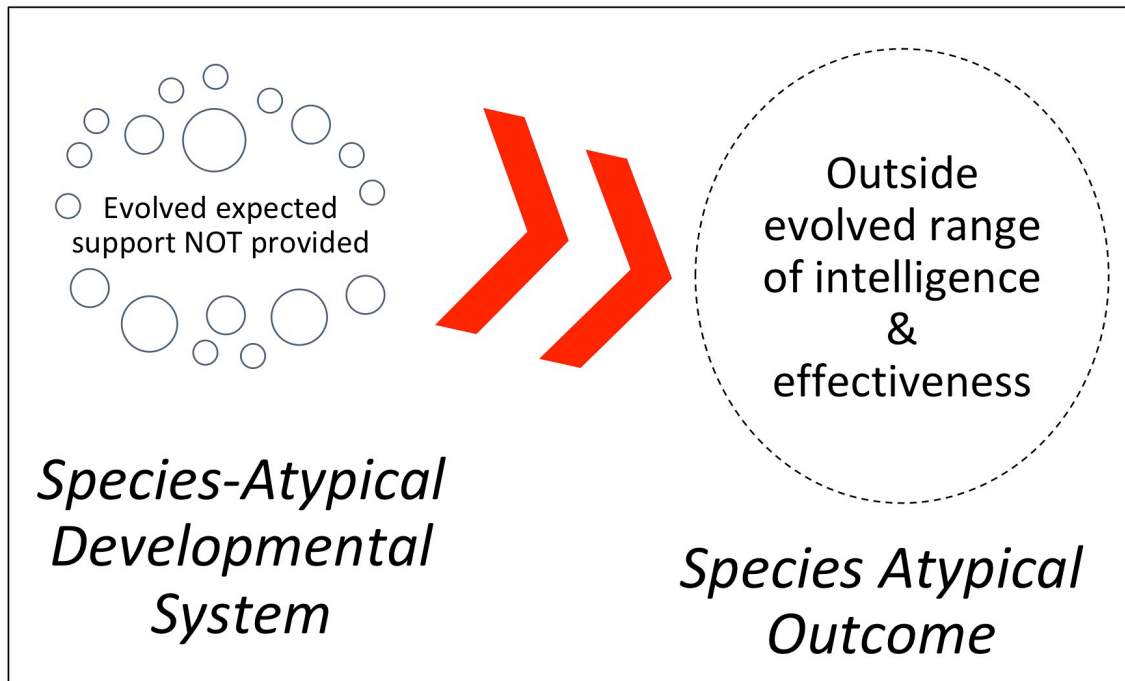
[slide: Univocity: Problem Solving Thinking] Univocity, on the other hand, is a problem-solving mode which is used, when necessary, this linear, logical thinking of what to do in a particular situation. It's rarely used, though, in these societies.

# All animals have a nest, humans too!



[slide: All animals have a nest, humans too!] So, as we can see from looking at ethology all animals have a nest. We do too. I'll mention what those characteristics are. When you provide a nest you're going to end up with a species-typical outcome because your species-typical developmental system. And that species-typical outcome is a smart, effective creature.

# What happens when a developmental system (or nest) is degraded?



Narvaez, 2014

[slide: What happens when a developmental system (or nest) is degraded?] What happens, though, when you don't provide that species-typical development system, but something atypical? Well, you're going to end up with a creature that's outside the evolved range of intelligence and effectiveness, a species atypical outcome.

# Shift to Patriarchy and Hierarchy

*Degraded Nest and Undermining  
of human development*

[slide: Shift to Patriarchy and Hierarchy] So what's happened over the course of history is that shift to patriarchy and hierarchy has undermined human development and has pulled us out of all those good things I just went through.





## What happens with unnestedness?

- Seeds ill health
  - Mental (anxiety, depression, anger, reactivity)
  - Physical
  - Social
  - Moral
- Disconnection from self, others, community, world

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[slide: What happens with unnestedness?] So what happens when we don't have this nestedness, that Number 1, the start of the cycle, you're going to have ill health. You'll have mental problems and anxiety, particularly, depression also, and anger and reactivity, because all your systems don't work very well. Physical ill health, social ill health, it'll be hard to get along with others because you're dysregulated, you didn't develop all those layers of social skills that are pre-verbal, and moral, your moral health will also be more self-oriented. So you feel generally disconnected from yourself, you don't know who you are, even raise a false self, you feel disconnected from others, from the community in the world.

## What happens **physiologically** when infant needs are ignored?

- Stress response
- Immune system
- Endocrine system
- Neurotransmitters (number, function)
- Emotions and emotion systems
- Corpus callosum and brain hemispheric integration



Gaps or lesions in brain systems from early trauma, abuse, neglect, or undercare

*Narvaez, 2014*

[slide: What happens physiologically when infant needs are ignored?] And physiologically this is occurring in part because all these systems have been misdeveloped. The stress response isn't working well, your immune system, endocrine system make the oxytocin system – you don't know, you don't feel good when you cuddle, for example, this is what we've seen in orphans, for example, that were in hospitals for so long or in orphanages, they have a hard time appreciating being physically close to others. Your neurotransmitters also are going to be affected, you'll have fewer of them and they won't function as well so you're not going to be as smart. Your emotional systems will be misdeveloped, I'll talk more about that. Your corpus callosum that unites the two halves of the brain is not going to be as thick and so you'll flip in and out of states. So early life stress is going to underlie the development of all these things and without the nest I call that "undercare".

## WHAT HAPPENS **PSYCHOLOGICALLY** WHEN EARLY NEEDS ARE IGNORED?

- Distrust of own body
- Impaired sense of self
- Living **AGAINST** instead of **WITH** others
- Socially disagreeable (oppositional or withdrawing)
- Distrust of others -> anxiety, cynicism, demonization

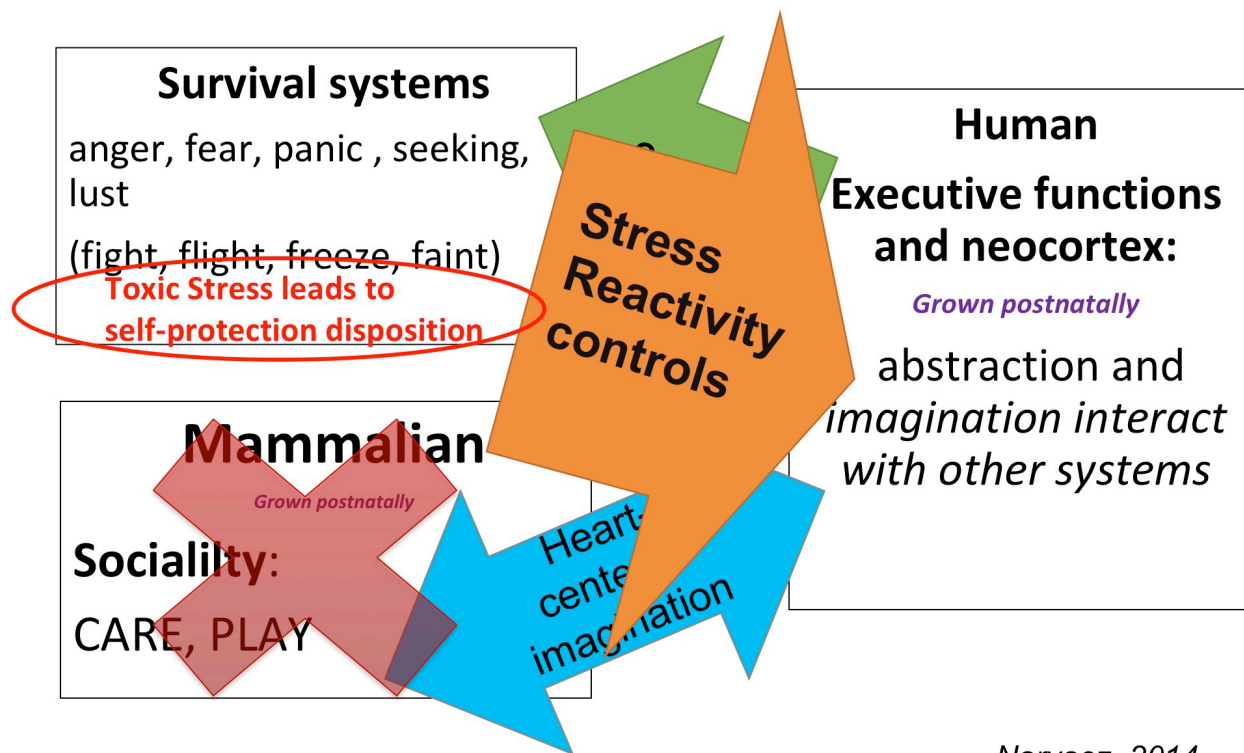
*Narvaez, 2014*

[slide: What happens psychologically when early needs are ignored?]

Psychologically, then, what you grow up with then is distrust of your own body and an impaired sense of who you are, never feeling secure, a deep sense of disconnection and insecurity living against others instead of with them, because that's – you didn't develop the things that help you do the latter, and you're kind of socially disagreeable, oppositional or withdrawal, and that's all fluidly interconnected with others as we see in our ancestral original societies. You have a basic distrust of others, too, which will breed that anxiety – that social anxiety, cynicism, as well as demonization of the others because what happens when you have that early disruption, basic fault, a primal wound, is that you've got to do something with that anger that you're going to have and the anxiety and it's easiest to not pay attention to it and heal it because it's all in this pre-verbal implicit cognition, instead you're going to push it out and target some other group or some other – it's easy to demonize green people, for example, and your family may have drawn you to pay attention to who's green and then every time you see someone

green or think about it, yeah I get in that panic mode and you just push all your anger and blame over there, instead of blaming your parents for not giving you what you needed because you're a little baby and didn't know. Or yourself because it's just too hard, too painful to look at yourself or to your parents – so you push it out.

## Brain Function (Paul MacLean)



Narvaez, 2014

[slide: brain function (Paul MacLean)] And so what's happening in the brain function – this is Paul MacLean's triune brain theory – very helpful for understanding the brain states we can get into, we were born with these survival systems, so basic emotional systems of anger, fear, panic, seeking, lust, intertwined with a stress response system of fight, flight, freeze, faint. And here we were born with those to keep us alive, right? Babies cry when their caregiver's not around, the mother's not around, and that brings the caregiver. So that's why it's so annoying to hear a baby cry because it's intended to get help quickly, and what happens after birth, though, is that mammalian systems are grown from experience.



You're ready to grow these, but then they're not being grown – or they hopefully are being grown – and so that's by the way you're treated. So you're gonna - If you're lovingly cared for with empathy and responsiveness and all the nest components, you'll grow your emotional systems of care and also the playfulness that's part of our mammalian heritage and also your executive functions will grow after birth so – these are the capacities to control yourself, to think beyond the present moment, to imagine alternatives and so on. So when things go well the executive functions learn to control the survival systems. So if a shadow came across the room and you think Oh, my goodness, it's a monster you thought for a moment, right, and then you realize no it's not a monster, these executive systems would calm you down after the panic of Oh my God it's a monster. So that's a well-functioning brain.

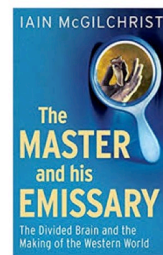
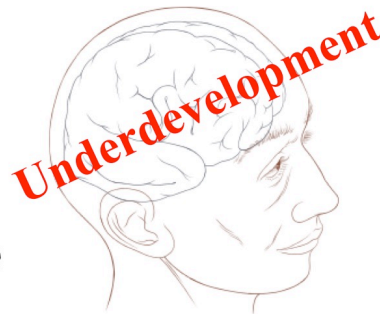
[slide: Brain Function (Paul MacLean)] And so you spend most of your time over here, in what I call heart-centered imagination, where you're enhancing your relationships, your social well-being and the well-being of others, and that's an enjoyable place to be. Now, when things don't go right in early life [45:31]

[slide: Brain Function (Paul MacLean)] your brain is going to be more reactive in this direction. You'll have early toxic stress, meaning you're left to cry alone, in sleep training [of the] cry it out variety is very harmful in this way [or] if you're left alone a lot, and let's say you have as a baby - you enhance these survival systems and we call that toxic stress and it's going to lead them to those overpowering the rest of your brain. Essentially you see red. And these other systems, and healing systems, don't grow very well then. They're impaired because all their attention is to surviving. And when you get stressed, which is going to happen a lot because you're dysregulated, you'll see stress – oh, they're out to get me, they're out to get me – right? And when that kicks in, your blood flow shifts away from your higher order thinking, away from your heart openness, and towards mobilizing you for fight, flight, freeze, faint. And so it floods the brain, shifts the blood flow away from your ability to control yourself, and so you won't think well, you won't feel well, and not get along well with others, except through dominance relationships.

## Right hemisphere development dominant in early years

- Self-regulation
- Intersubjectivity & social pleasure
- Emotional intelligence
- Empathy
- Beingness
- Self transcendence
- Higher consciousness
- Receptive intelligence

Weinberg, I. (2000). The prisoners of despair: **Right hemisphere deficiency and suicide.**  
*Neuroscience and Biobehavioral Reviews*



(Allan Schore 1994, 2001, 2003; Narvaez, 2014)

By Patrick J. Lynch, medical illustrator (Patrick J. Lynch, medical illustrator) [CC BY 2.5 (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/2.5/>)], via Wikimedia Commons  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AHuman\\_head\\_and\\_brain\\_diagram.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AHuman_head_and_brain_diagram.svg)

Narvaez, 2014

[slide: right hemisphere development dominant in early years] What's also underdeveloped, then, in these early years, which is normally developed in good nested care is the right hemisphere and it's the seat of all these things that are really important for getting along with others, for having a sense of being in a living world, for having a sense of responsiveness to the natural world and to others. All sorts of self-regulation, emotional intelligence, sense of being present, of energy among everyone, all these things are going to be underdeveloped in a person who is unnested. And, what's going to happen then, is univocity becomes the primary way of being, or thinking is the problem-solving mode.

# Univocity: Problem solving thinking

*Dominant in hierarchical societies*

- **Linear logical thinking**, assessing past and predicting future
- Relies on **differentiation** (something is or isn't).
  - Reality is one thing only, not pluralistic
  - Reality is **hierarchical**
- Obsession with **order, precision and prediction**
- **Hierarchically-arranged** societies made up of separate bits
  - People, offices, assembly lines, or power structures.
  - Contests determine the few who are at the top of the pyramid.
- **Differentiation leads to deep anxiety and death terror**
  - the sense of the present is thin and emptied out of polysemy.
  - The focus is on the future which will bring about certain death.

**Left Brain Dominance**

Marvin Bram

[slide: univocity: Problem solving thinking] In hierarchical societies there's a lot of problems to solve. They've got to keep the people lower down, the non-elites, working so that the elites keep getting all the assets and they're the ones that have the privileges, and you have to convince those lower people, or coerce them, into working hard so the system keeps going. So hierarchy needs coercion. And the hierarchy is going to then be reliant on this linear logical thinking and differentiating things, one thing from another and this moves into a hierarchical order, a hierarchically arranged society with separate bits. What happens is, that because the focus is a hierarchical society, for example, a monoagricultural society, you have to predict when the crops are going to be ready, when you should plant, so you're always thinking about the past and future, past and future, and you're worried and you think about past and future you're going to be oriented to anxiety and future death, right? So death terror, instead of being on the present moment as polysemy provides. So it's a left-brain orientation because the right brain is underdeveloped - the social brain is underdeveloped - you end up with this little

thinking conscious brain, left brain, that is very much about static characterization and order. And we think that's the normal way to be and we highlight reasoning of that kind to be this is the best way a human can be and so on.

## Reshaping of Mind through Western History, increasing...

- Self-protectionist thought, action, worldview
- Suppression of polysemy; emphasis on univocity
- Sense of disconnection
- Dishonoring nature and the cycle of life
- Coercion taken as normal
- Human potential not reached

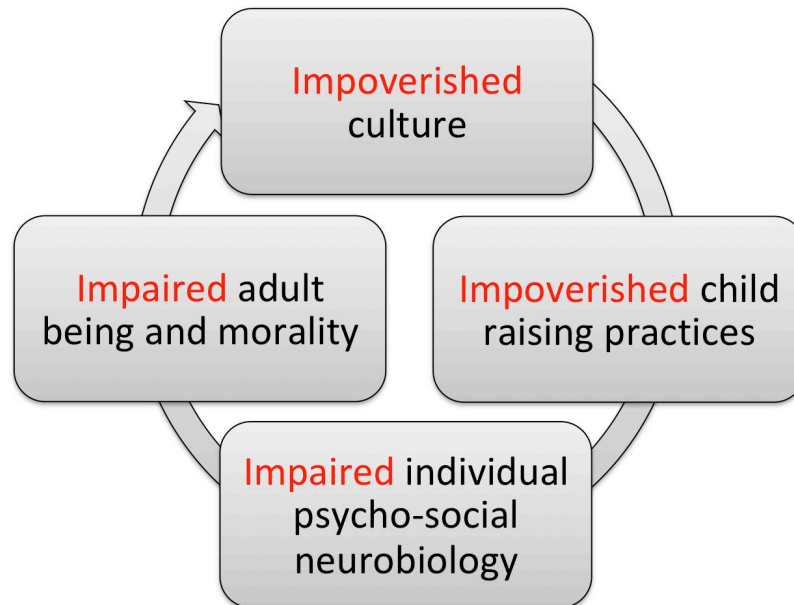
*Narvaez, 2014*

[slide: Reshaping of Mind through Western History, increasing. . . ] So western history has re-shaped the human mind toward self-protectionism, suppression of polysemy, emphasis on univocity. Increased disconnection which leads also to dishonouring of nature because you don't perceive it, like it's all dead, isn't it? It's all dumb, isn't it? That's the Western view recently and dishonouring the cycle of life. Coercion is taken to be normal because you've got all these disregulated people and you have to use punishment to get them to do what you want them to do and in hierarchy, of course, human potential is not reached.



# Dominator Societies: Baselines Shifted Toward Vice

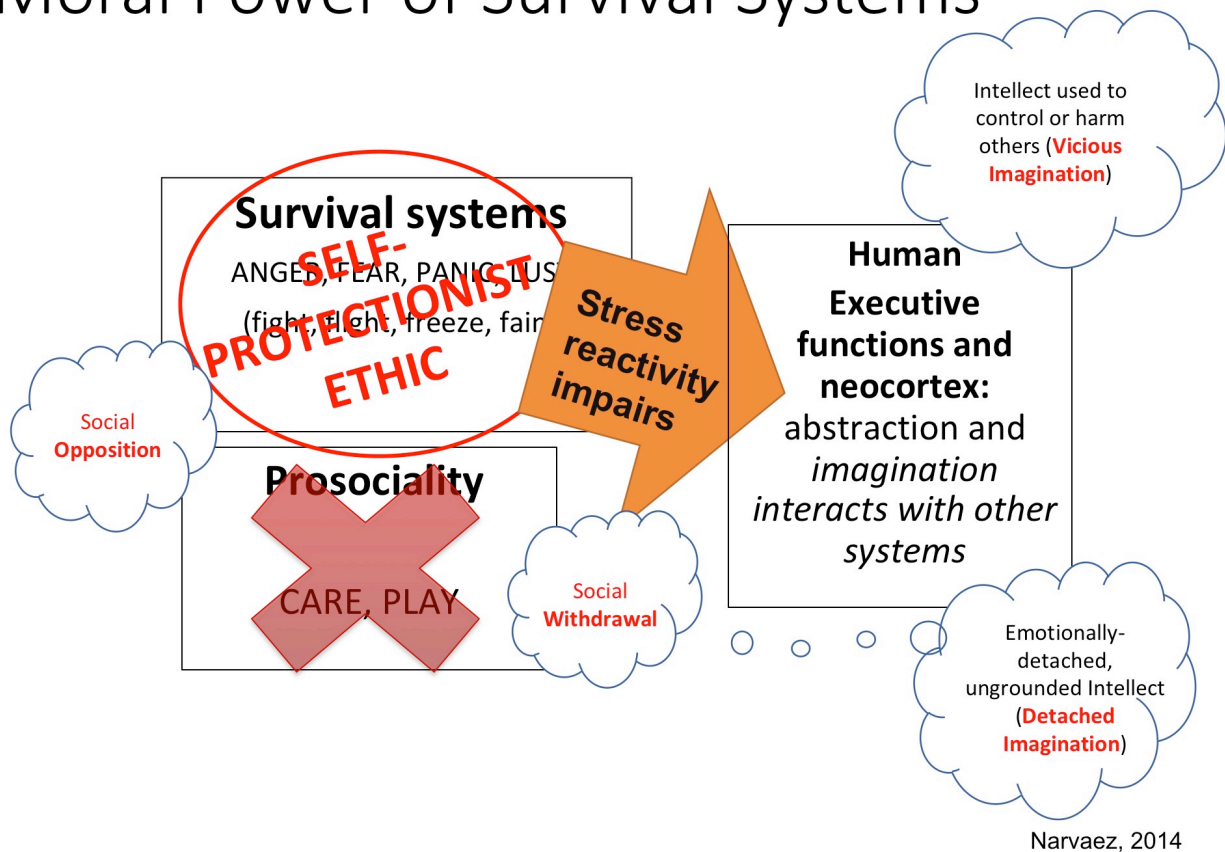
Dysregulated  
Survival oriented  
Self-focused  
Anthropocentric  
Threat reactive  
Ill-fittedness  
Aggressive  
Withdrawn



Narvaez, 2014

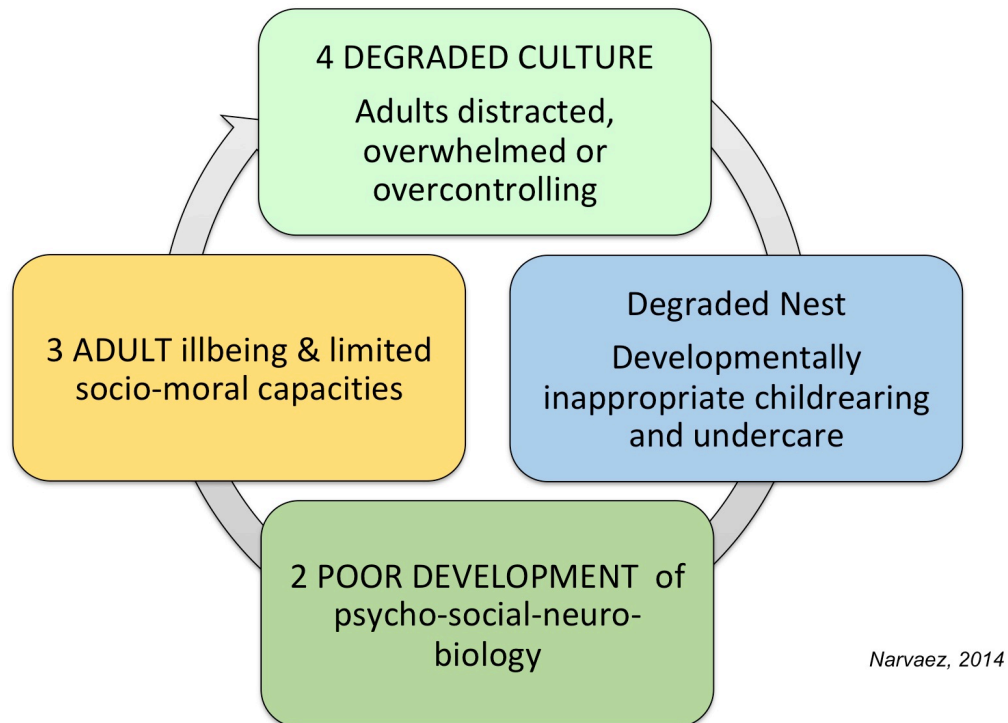
[slide: Dominator Societies: Baselines Shifted Toward Vice] So what we've done is shifted all our baselines toward vice, so we have impoverished child-rearing practices, impaired individuals, impaired adulthood, and impoverished culture. And it leads to all these problems we have.

# Moral Power of Survival Systems



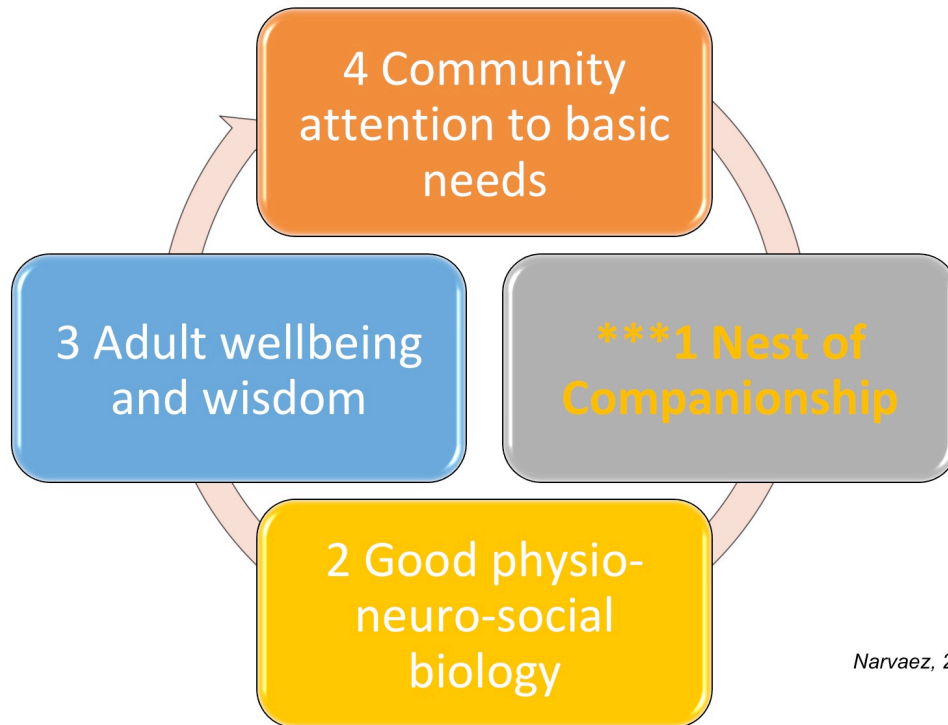
[slide: Moral Power of Survival Systems] What happens then, as I mentioned, your self-protectionism kicks in, and in a moment you're going to be oppositional, brace yourself against that other person, or you're going to withdraw like a little mouse because your systems don't work very well and you're oriented to dominance or submission. And on the right side of the diagram your intellect, the way you use your thinking and planning skills, is that you're going to either control others or harm them in some fashion, vicious imagination or you're just going to detach emotionally, from emotionally-connected thoughts. And you're going to dream up things and not think about the consequences. And that's a danger for everyone else.

# Cycle of Competitive Detachment



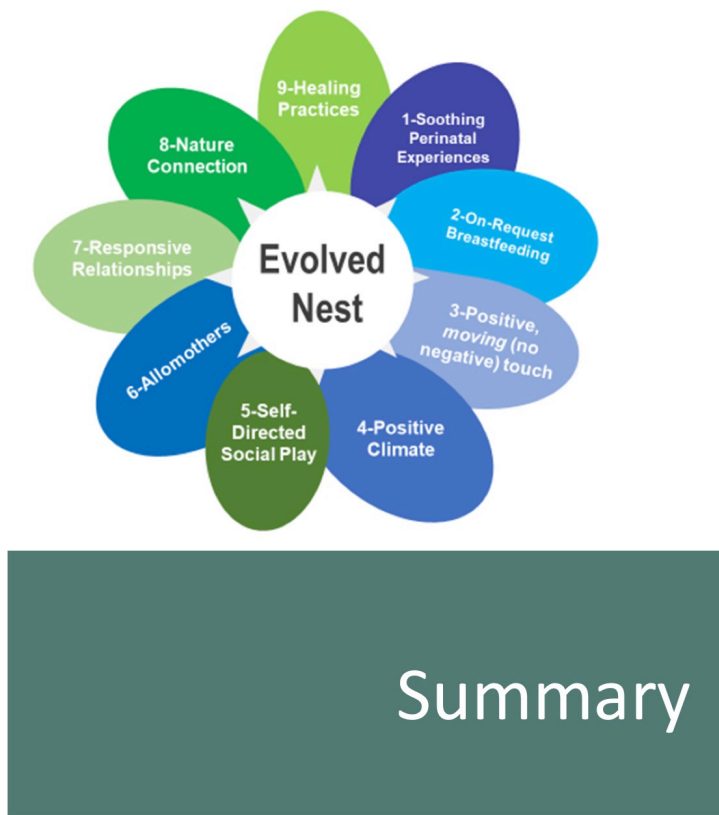
[slide Cycle of Competitive Detachment] So it ended up now, with - and this is where we are, is a cycle of competitive detachment with a degraded nest, poor development, adult ill-being and a degraded culture where the adults are distracted, overwhelmed or over-controlling. And the cycle is continuing because we forgot our heritage and we've suppressed motherhood and mothering.

## Cooperative Companionship Starts with Mothering, the Evolved Nest



Narvaez, 2014

[slide: Cooperative Companionship Starts with Mothering the Evolved nest]  
 To return, we need to intervene at multiple levels. The particular one we study in my lab is the nest of companionship that mothering provides, that traditional societies provide, regional societies. And leading to these positive outcomes.



- Mothering is the key to healthy individuals —the Evolved Nest
- Mothering is central to healthy societies where basic needs are met.
- Restoring the nest for all but especially babies, will change human futures.

EvolvedNest.org

[slide Summary] And so in sum mothering is the key to healthy individuals. It's also central to healthy societies where basic needs are met. And restoring the nest for everyone but especially for babies when the brain is being set up and established, babies are born 18 months early, they look like fetuses until 18 months of age, everything happens to them in those first three years of life setting their trajectory for life. So we really have to restore the nest for babies and then nestedness to the society and we'll change human futures.



## More Information

*Thanks to Mary Tarsha, the Moral Psychology Lab at the University of Notre Dame, and the scholars whose work inspired ours!*



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**Blog at Psychology Today:** *Moral Landscapes*  
<http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/moral-landscapes>

**Webpage** (blog links, download papers, etc.)  
<https://sites.nd.edu/darcianarvaez/>



*Find us at [EvolvedNest.org](http://EvolvedNest.org)*

[slide with contact information] Thanks very much to Mary Tarsha, and Moral Psychology Lab and the scholars at Notre Dame whose work we integrate and inspire us. There's a lot of information you can find here at these links and check out EvolvedNest.org. Thanks.



Letecia Layson: Thank you Darcia. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Darcia Narvaez: Well, that was a quick overview, I work at both a high level big picture stuff and also at a low level, so I try to, you know, mix it up and try to make it clear, but I see the pattern and try to convey that. And also hopefully something came across but certainly mothering and the gifting that Genevieve [Vaughan] has discussed is primary in the core way of being that we have to re-establish, restore. I think it also matters that when we restore that our ability to pay attention to the natural world as a set of living beings, which I think is really critical to feel gifted from trees and the wind and rivers and plants – you have to realize: they're alive, they're alive too but if your right hemisphere isn't working very well, maybe you don't perceive it unless you have some psychedelic experience or other healing that can occur as an adult.

Thanks so much for listening

Ends 53:50.

Questions begin at 2:37:33

Judith: These are questions for Darcia. I've grouped together several questions because they're all on the same topic. They're all questions about how do you fix what's broken. Natalie asks what do you advise to women who've experienced non-nested childhood? Teresa asks how do we fix the nest once time has passed? Can we nurture adults who have had a degraded nest? Bailin asked where can we find tools for adults and Cassandra from the other end, from the other side asks what can a mother do to heal a bond with a child that has been taken from her?

Darcia. All right. Thank you for those and thanks again for letting me be in on this important conversation. It's really an honor. We at [evolvenest.org](http://evolvenest.org) are organizing self-nesting tools. We have several up already and we're developing more of them. And I think - so there's two basic ones I would start with and one is - well there's so many actually. Self-calming. that's our new nesting tool, will be coming out I think next week, but we have 28 days of things you can do to calm yourself and then find the ones that work for you. We have 28 days of nature connection so building your connection with the natural world to start to treat it as a partner rather than as a dead object of some sort, or full of objects.

But I think what I usually recommend primarily if you've been unnested is to play. So when you play in the moment social play, playing chase or tag, riding around, especially with young children. It actually builds and develops your right hemisphere, which is what we undermine in our unnested early years is that ability. The right hemisphere governs all sorts of self-regulatory systems: empathy, and the ability to to actually develop receptive intelligence connecting to the natural world. So playing is probably the best thing to do. It's probably culturally distinctive or difficult sometimes; adults think they shouldn't play because of their dignity. So you have to work around that in some cultures. And if there is a bond that hasn't developed or that got - there's primal wounds. I write in my blog for Psychology Today and we're going to put these into books for people. At [evolvedness.org](http://evolvedness.org) I write about the primal wound and how to heal it, how to self-actualize when you've been sort of shut down in your life. And we have a number of posts on those kinds of things.

Now in terms of a mother-child relationship these are of course unique situations

so it's hard to give particular advice except - and it depends on the ages and all - how long and what happened, and so that's very difficult. Again to get to playing together if there's a way to, that's a different mindset. When you're in the playing mode it opens you up. When mammals play, which is part of our heritage, you have to be sensitive to your partner in the playing or they'll give up on you, right? If you're too aggressive or something and you have to be and you build in this receptacle in a way gift giving, back and forth, of being silly and that kind of play is really very healthy. There's a book you could look at called Playful Parenting which is oriented to healing the child's attachment if they have an insecure attachment, which is one way we measure how well early childhood is gone, And so that might be something to use. So just a few ideas.