

The effects of parenting, and of the environment more generally, do not have to remain a mystery or a dogma—they can be investigated empirically. The results, however, may dismay those who have their own personal vision of how the human mind ought to work.

Judith Harris in “The New Yorker”

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A Conforming Bunch of Individualists

Parents matter, according to Judith Harris, not because they shape their children’s personalities, but because kids need to be kept safe, be kept healthy, be given opportunities to learn, and become socialized in appropriate environments outside the home.

In her books “No Two Alike” and “The Nurture Assumption,” Harris convincingly shows that no reliable body of evidence supports the idea that parenting inculcates in children the personality traits measured by psychologists on personality tests. Harris does this by documenting 40 years of research by behavioral geneticists, such as the late David C. Rowe and Robert Plomin from Kings College, London. Their work indicates that slightly less than half of our personalities can be attributed to genes and, counterintuitively, that the larger half of who we are is fashioned by a different environment than the one we share with our brothers and sisters inside the family home.

How could it be true?

Behavioral geneticists study the heritable elements of behavior. That includes the influence of indirect genetic effects, which are how our genetic predisposition or physical attributes, such as shyness or attractiveness act on the environments that affect our personalities.

In the 1930s, behavioral geneticist Barbara Stoddard Burks had the notion that adopted children could be used in a natural experiment correlating their behavioral traits with the traits of their adoptive and birth parents, and began searching out reliable data which could be used to make comparisons.

By the 1970s, researchers had found evidence in the excellent adoption records kept in Scandinavian countries that suggested behavioral traits such as criminality were significantly heritable. Variations on these correlational studies compared fraternal and identical twins to determine the

heritability of specific traits. As the research became more sophisticated, the gold standard of behavioral genetics became the comparison of personality traits between identical twins raised together and those raised apart.

When traits on standard personality tests were compared between identical twins separated at birth, behavioral geneticists found that slightly less than half of personality traits could be attributed to heritability. But what roiled the waters of developmental psychology, and even the field of behavioral genetics, was that identical twins raised together were no more alike in measured personality than those who were raised apart.

It turned out that, when similar genes were taken into account, all biologically related and adopted siblings growing up in the same home were no more alike, as adults, than complete strangers. These differences perplexed researchers because they believed, intuitively, that a shared environment, the home, should have made siblings more alike.

Researchers began to study the discreet behavior of parents toward individual children to determine if those relationships constituted the elusive environmental factor that made all siblings growing up in the same home less alike in personality than intuition predicted and their different genes could explain.

But those studies, including a large, reputable study overseen by Plomin, "Sibling Comparison of Differential Parental Treatment in Adolescence: Gender, Self-Esteem, and Emotionality as Mediators of the Parenting-Adjustment Association" (NEAD), found no material effect from parenting style on personality and showed that parents were adapting their behavior to the genetic predisposition of their individual children.

David Reiss, the psychiatrist and psychodynamic family therapist who summarized the findings, was shocked at the negative results on parenting in the NEAD study. At the time Harris wryly noted to Plomin that the study should have been designed to look at environmental effects outside the home and Plomin admitted that it was, perhaps, a little naïve not to have designed the study to include this possibility.

Psychologists have named whatever makes children different from one another—apart from genes—the "unshared environment." This unshared environment has become a problem for everyone, because of the reasonable but controversial inference that parenting style (unless it is severely abusive) has no measurable effect on the routine behaviors of children over the course of their lives.

Similar results from intervention studies using control groups and the pair-wise correlational studies between siblings have been replicated many times. Ironically, many of Harris's most committed critics, including Jerome Kagan and Eleanor Maccoby, have contributed to studies that support the surprising findings of behavioral geneticists about the unshared environment.

Technically, the term "unshared environment" does not refer to the environment outside the home. According to Harris, developmental psychologists such as Maccoby and John Martin, who are committed to the idea that parenting must have an effect on personality, stand by their intuition that the unshared environment functions within the home, even if it is unidentified and unpredictable.

Harris, however, hypothesizes that children instinctively but unconsciously know that their parents' opinions, behaviors, and rules are not the ones that really count. The environment outside the home, in an evolutionary sense, is an environment much more important than the home for forming our attitudes, future well-being, and the replication of our DNA. This is a conclusion that eminent developmental psychologists such as Kagan, Martin, and Maccoby do not accept.

The Unshared Environment

In "No Two Alike," Harris speculates about where we might find the other cause, the unshared environment helping to shape personality. Stepping outside the theoretical boundaries constructed by developmental psychology and behavioral genetics she bases her hypothesis on research in the social sciences, anthropology, neurology, and the theories of evolutionary psychologists such as Stephen Pinker, Leda Cosmides and John Tooby.

She proposes three dynamic elements operating outside the home that influence the way we see ourselves and the world, that cumulatively conspire to make us more alike and different at the same time.

She names them the relationship, socialization, and status-seeking systems. Harris sees them as special collectors of data, each having different motives and giving different kinds of feedback which evolved to solve specific problems. Each marshals skills and instincts corresponding to known social deficits that arise when certain areas of the brain are damaged by accident or disease.

In the following descriptive summaries of each of these interdependent systems, the detail and examples I have included reflect my understanding and are not meant to convince but to encourage further inquiry and the reading of "No Two Alike," "The Nurture Assumption," and the work of evolutionary psychologists such as Pinker.

Hogging the Conscious Mind

The workings of the relationship system are fully conscious and hog the conscious mind. It is primed at birth, and is far more receptive to the differences between people than to their similarities.

Infants who have received nothing but loving kindness from their mothers often will cry out in fear if a stranger tries to pick them up. Babies of mothers suffering from postpartum depression behave solemnly only when they are with their

mothers, and not with other caregivers. This innate ability to discriminate between individuals is a skill that is associated with discreet areas of the brain. It is this skill that allows us to easily create a story about “the way we are” from a vast log of memories of relationships we have accumulated while growing up.

But our important relationships with our parents and siblings operate independently of the socialization process. This may explain why our behavior and standing at home are so often dramatically different from our behavior and standing in other environments.

Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder, but...

The socialization system operates behind the scenes of conscious memory and makes people of the same group more alike. We instinctively embrace the blended expectations of behavior, language, and morals of the group we have either chosen to identify with by natural disposition or are delivered to by circumstance.

Harris uses the following example to explain how the socialization system may work: Studies conducted in cultures all over the world show that people tend to prefer faces that have been artificially blended from others, making them more symmetrical. In other words, facial attractiveness tends to regress toward the mean. Harris believes such an unconscious process to create prototypes and define social categories may operate in other realms using mechanisms separate from those we use to define relationships.

In the same vein, children all over the world prefer playmates of the same sex and approximate age as themselves. As social scientist Leon Festinger noted, “People prefer to compare themselves with others who are similar to themselves, which means others in their own social category.”

Harris’s socialization system may also explain why, in the Scandinavian studies, the criminal behavior of adoptees correlates strongly with birth parents’ except in inner-city environments that have a street culture high in criminal behavior (strong social pressure tends to trump genetic tendency in adolescence). This is possibly an example of an interdependent effect of the socialization and status seeking systems.

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Harris sees the status-seeking system as dependent upon the other two systems in her hypothesis, but also as the primary path through which the environment shapes individual personality. She posits that a majority of the status-seeking system’s work is accessible to the conscious mind, much to the discomfort and/or pleasure of many.

To have status one must have a sense of what other people think. One example Harris gives is research that shows being looked at by others encourages people to speak up. In ways like this, we primarily experience ourselves indirectly, by

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“reading the minds” of others. Children, by age 6 or 7, are believed to have developed an idea of their status among friends and classmates-independent of their status with their parents-and to create dominance structures.

The status-seeking system is highly contextual and multi-dimensional: John is stronger than George who is stronger than Jake who is smarter than both John and Jake, and all adjust their ideas about their status according to those present and according to the task at hand. In this way we become a “conforming bunch of individualists.”

Harris points out what she thinks is a clue that the status-seeking system exists: autistic children may not experience a sense of status or have questions about self-acceptance because they do not have the ability to guess what other people may be thinking.

Status can be gained, among other ways, by maneuvering into the right relationships within our social milieu, or by applying brute dominance. Those who inherently acquire self-esteem from group acceptance are unlikely to use aggression as a strategy. On the other hand, positive feedback in the pecking order more than makes up for the fact that aggressive individuals are disliked.

Dismayingly, the status-seeking system appears to subject the development of personality to random events. Getting lucky at cards, or gaining undeserved recognition, can change the way we are treated and how we feel about ourselves. If being looked at in a particular way triggers confidence in the recipient, that also explains one of the advantages of being attractive, or having a deep voice, or being tall, or being born to well-known parents, which have indirect heritable effects.

However, parents do not have the power to directly affect their children through the status-seeking system. According to Harris, “The system either discounts information obtained from close relatives or averages it together with so much other information that it doesn’t have much influence.”

The hypothesized modularity of the three systems Harris uses to explain how we become who we are may help explain people’s well-documented inconsistencies in behavior across different situations such as why children act differently with their teachers and parents—or even inexplicable phenomena such as Chairman Mao’s and the Third Reich’s ability to turn children against their families. I have always wondered what allows people who feel prejudice against a class of people or ethnicity to still count members of these groups as friends.


Dénouement

Harris states that it was only when she started thinking about three separate systems, which had different motives and collected different kinds of information, that she understood how evolution might have constructed the “conforming bunch of individualists” we seem to be. The relationship system, and our important ability to guess what other people are thinking, works with the status-seeking system by allowing us to gauge where we stand with our peers. And, the socialization system sets the playing field where we jockey for our position in the

larger world outside the family.

If Harris is on the right track about what does shape the larger half of personality, the unshared environment is the community of our peers and mentors outside our immediate families and not a hidden dimension of reality operating within the nuclear family.

This, of course, does not mean that children, especially those with a disability or special talent, are not affected by having parents who are effective advocates, or by attending a school with adequate resources. It may, in fact, mean that those without supportive parents have more hope and it may put more responsibility on society and especially our education system to help them over the course of their lives.

Much of what I have had to leave out of this description of Harris’s work because of limited space is discomfiting and controversial, but enlightening. Harris’s explanation of the work of cognitive behaviorist Walter Mischel on the universal inconsistency in people’s behavior across different situations is an excellent example. A careful reading of her books may leave even the reader who has intelligently thought about nurture and nature thinking he or she has assumed way too much about what makes us who we are. 



Judith Harris

Judith Harris is a theorist who for decades wrote textbooks in the field of developmental psychology from 1981 to 1994. She is senior author of “The Child” (Prentice-Hall, 1984, 1987, 1991) and “Infant and Child” (1992). Over the course of this part of her career she accumulated so much dissonant, but credible, information challenging the dominant paradigm on parenting that she felt she could no longer, in good conscience, continue.

In 1998, her initial foray challenging the prevailing notions about the effects parenting (to the chagrin of many developmental psychologists) won one of the most prestigious awards in the field of psychology, the George A. Miller Award from the American Psychological Association, for her article “Where Is the Child’s Environment? A Group Socialization Theory of Development” published in the *Psychological Review* in 1995. This award is given to an outstanding article, particularly one that makes linkages between diverse fields of psychology. Her most recent book is “No Two Alike”, which was published in 2006. For more on Harris and her most recent publications please google “No Two Alike website.”