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Harris, Judith Rich: Why Parents Do Not Matter

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Francis Galton is credited for having initiated the nature versus nurture debate more than one century ago. In short, the controversy consists of whether who we are and what we become are determined by what we inherit from our parents or by what we learn from social experiences. While Galton believed strongly that inherited intelligence explained why some people became prominent government officials, business leaders, and scientists, the debate over whether nature or nurture is paramount to success continues to this day. The nature versus nurture debate has expanded far beyond issues related to why some people rise to social prominence and has challenged our understanding of adolescent behavior.

Prior to the 20th century, children were seen as resilient and it was commonly believed that there was not much parents could do to shape how their children turned out. It was fate that determined success or failure in adulthood. But the 20th century ushered in the notion that parents were sources of negative and positive influences on children's behavior and their future. Studying how parents socialize their children was thought to be the best way to understand adolescent behavior and why they grew up to achieve different levels of success. But this perspective, which is referred to by Judith Rich Harris as the "nurture assumption," was challenged when, in 1995, Harris published an article in *Psychological Review* that [p. 432 ↓] asserted that parental influence on children was exaggerated. In that now-famous article, Harris asserted that it was not how parents nurtured their children that affected their behavior or how they turned out. Rather, it was the teens with whom they identified and from whom they learned how to act that were instrumental to understanding adolescent behavior. In 1998, Harris published *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do* to more fully articulate her controversial perspective that she called *group socialization theory*.

The Historical Background to the Group Socialization Theory

Group socialization theory was proposed as a replacement to the nurture assumption, which was rooted in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytic theory and in the principles of behaviorism promulgated especially by B. F. Skinner. Freud contended that the

psychological problems suffered by adults can be traced back to how they were treated by their parents while they were still children. Interestingly, even behaviorism, which was proposed as an alternative to psychoanalysis, started with the assumption that the events of childhood—particularly those involving parents—are fundamental to understanding how children behave and how they turn out as adults. Behaviorists believe that children are impressionable and easily influenced through rewards and punishments, and it is therefore the environment in which they are raised—not the genes they were given by their parents—that determines their destinies.

Research conducted from the psychoanalytic and behaviorist perspectives does not try to ascertain whether there are parental influences on children's behavior. Rather, this research focuses on *how* parents' child-rearing practices ultimately affect their children's development. If parents do a good job, they provide their children with the tools necessary to be happy, smart, well-adjusted, and self-confident; as such, these children are prepared to make positive contributions to society as adults. But if parents fail to prepare their children for adulthood, the consequences could be dire. Not only will parents know that they played a part in their children's failures, but they also will suffer shame and public ridicule for parenting children who do not meet society's standards. And sometimes the consequences can be even more serious because parent liability laws place the parents at the center of blame for their children's delinquency, potentially resulting in the imposition of fines or even incarceration.

But how does one account for the language skills of children whose parents are deaf and unable to teach them a verbal language? Or immigrant parents who taught their native language to their children only to find that they have—in a relatively short period of time—adopted the language of their peers, with only the slightest trace of an accent? Perhaps the roles of parents in the lives of their children are not what psychoanalytic theory or behaviorism portrays. This is not to suggest that parents do not play an important role in their children's development. On the contrary, Harris recognizes the importance of parents in the socialization process. Parents are typically the first to teach their children a language, the first to teach how to establish and maintain relationships, and the first to teach the importance of following social norms. But Harris contends that these early experiences do not have long-term effects. Harris's group socialization theory posits that past experiences do not determine behaviors during adulthood. What

children learn from their parents at home may not be relevant to situations outside the home.

Group Socialization Theory

Group socialization theory is based on three propositions. First, parents have little or no influence to shape their children's personalities. Parents and children have similar personalities because they share genes and typically belong to similar cultures or subcultures. Second, children are socialized by experiences outside the home. It is through these experiences that personalities are shaped, and these experiences are shared with one's peers. Third, behavior patterns and emotions are not generalizable across social contexts. Similar behaviors are the consequence of a genetic predisposition to act in a particular way. How one behaves with parents or siblings is likely to be very different than how one acts with peers. Therefore, parental relationships matter when children are at home. Relationships with peers matter when children are away from home.

It is outside of the social context of the home that children learn to act like others who are like [p. 433 ↓] themselves—that is, in their own social category or reference group. They are not supposed to act like their parents. Most socialization involves willing participation in same-sex and same-age groups. Children willingly enter these groups because they want to “fit in.” Therefore, socialization is something kids do to themselves and for themselves in group settings. It is not something that is imposed on children by adults. On the contrary, socialization is the process by which children adapt their behavior to the behaviors expected by others in the same social category.

Group socialization theory asserts that the influence of peers is so strong that even if parents were switched, children would become the same adults so long as the social contexts of school and neighborhood were to remain the same. Parents teach their children important life skills that they bring with them when they enter society. But if the language their parents taught them is not the language of their peers, then children will adopt their peers' language. The same is true if other aspects of culture are to conflict. The peer group's culture will always win out over the culture taught by parents.

Group Socialization Theory and Delinquency

Why do some teens smoke cigarettes, drink alcohol, steal cars, and commit assaults while others do not? Teens create their own cultures that define behavioral norms and, although the culture to which they subscribe may have certain elements that are consistent with that of their parents' culture, what is retained and what is rejected is up to the discretion of teens. It is not surprising, therefore, that children who associate with delinquent peers are also more likely to participate in delinquent acts. The same is true of children who live in neighborhoods that have high levels of delinquency, for it is within those neighborhoods that peer groups are formed and children conform to the norms of their peers.

Group socialization theory contends that there may be ways for parents to effectively intervene in the lives of children who are living delinquent lifestyles. For example, parents could go to extreme measures to interfere with delinquent peer relationships, such as selling their homes and moving into a middle-class neighborhood. Teenagers who belong to middle-class (or higher) families are less likely to run afoul with the law. It is these adolescents who are likely to be raised in neighborhoods that subscribe to middle-class norms. But moving to another neighborhood may not be enough. Being a member of a group is not the only way that group norms are influential. Even children who are not participating in group activities may still look to the group as a reference group. Therefore, the desire to be similar to those in the same social category may be enough to result in the adoption of the group's norms.

Harris (2009, p. 4) asserts, "The nurture assumption is not a truism; it is not even a universally acknowledged truth. It is a product of our culture—a cherished cultural myth." Parents are not to blame for the behavior of their children. Children are socialized by their peers and delinquency is mostly a group activity that reflects group norms. Delinquency for most kids is temporary and situational. All in all, Harris believes that most children who participate in delinquency are generally good kids who will eventually mature out of their delinquency and become law-abiding adults.

Group Socialization Theory Today

More than a decade has passed since *The Nurture Assumption* first appeared in print. The revised and updated version, published in February 2009, presents additional evidence in support of group socialization theory. Harris also clarifies complex concepts and controversial principles of her theory. She admits that there is still considerable resistance to group socialization theory in academe. Many psychologists still hold on to the principles of the nurture assumption, even though they “have not yet proven ... that parents have a strong influence” on the behavior of their children (Harris, 2009, p. xx). There is evidence that the public is beginning to accept the role that heredity plays in human behavior, and criminological research is using group socialization theory in order to better understand genetic and social influences on human social behavior.

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See also

- [Freudian Theory](#)
- [Peers and Delinquency](#)
- [Spergel, Irving: Neighborhoods and Delinquent Subcultures](#)
- [Wilson, James Q., and Richard J. Herrnstein: Crime and Human Nature](#)
- [Wilson, James Q., and Richard J. Herrnstein: Crime and Human Nature](#)
- [Wolfgang, Marvin E., and Franco Ferracuti: Subculture of Violence Theory](#)

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