

Judith Harris, Peer Groups, and Child Rearing

Judith Harris, in her very interesting book [*The Nurture Assumption*](#), argued that while children are shaped by both genetics and environment, the relevant environment for most of them is not the home but the peer group. Her explanation was that human beings are good at recognizing and conforming to different rules in different environments. The typical child can and does show one face to his parents, a different one to his peers, and it is the peer group version that grows into the adult personality. By her account, none of the popular stories about birth order, child rearing practices, and the like as determinants of adult personality are supported by the evidence. If she is right, and I think it likely that she is, that raises an interesting question about the history of psychology. How could beliefs about things such as the influence of birth order and childrearing be widely held within a scientific community when there was no evidence that they were true?

Part of the answer is the confusion between genetic and environmental causation. Someone confident that personality depends only on environment will interpret similarities between parent and child as due to the affect of the environment provided by the parent. To distinguish between the two alternatives you need to look at children reared by people other than their biological parents. When you do so, it turns out that observed similarities are in large part due to genetics.

Another part of the answer has to do with the nature of statistical evidence. Suppose you believe that birth order affects personality. You get personality evidence on a bunch of people, test for correlations between personality and birth order, and find one — first born daughters are more self-confident than second and third born. You come up with a plausible explanation, that the eldest child has had the experience of bossing her younger siblings around, and publish. The correlation is confirmed at the .05 level, meaning that there is no more than one chance in twenty that chance would produce it.

Another believer in the importance of birth order does a similar study, finds no effect for first born daughters but discovers that last born sons are more optimistic than first born. He too comes up with a plausible explanation and publishes. The process continues for many years. Occasionally someone is unable to find a correlation and, since failure is rarely interesting, abandons that project in favor of something more likely to get published. To someone looking at the published literature it is obvious that birth order affects personality, since practically everyone agrees about that, even if the details are a matter of dispute.

Only when it occurs to someone to combine the results from many studies does it become clear what is happening. With considerably more than twenty possible relations between birth order and personality, pure chance will usually result in a significant correlation for one of them — a different one each time. Pool the data and the result vanishes.

The origin of Harris's book makes an interesting story. She got a masters in psychology from Harvard, was discouraged from going further by a professor who assured her that she did not have the makings of a successful scholar. She left academia, married, helped support her family by coauthoring child development textbooks. Eventually she concluded that a good deal of what those textbooks said was not supported by the evidence. She reported her conclusion, and the evidence for it, as an article published in *The Psychological Review*.

The article provoked a lot of mail, partly about the controversial argument, partly asking who the author was, since nobody in the field had ever heard of her. It ended up receiving the American Psychological Association's award for an outstanding recent article in general psychology. The

prize was named after George Miller, the Harvard professor who told her that she had no future as an academic.

God, Judith Harris concluded, has a sense of humor.

Family as Peer Group

Harris qualified her claim by observing that for some children the family is the peer group. She gave as an example the case of a black worker with four daughters who decided that they were all going to be doctors. They ended up as one doctor and three other professionals. He did it by making the family the people with whom his daughters chiefly interacted and with whose values they identified. That pattern describes my experience as well, very much an outsider in school, seeing my family as real people and my age peers as at least mildly alien. I gather from correspondence with Judith Harris that it may have been true of her as well.

This suggests an important point about home schooling: It makes it more likely that your children's parents, siblings, and a few friends will function as the effective peer group. Seen from a hostile standpoint, that means parents trying to control their children. Seen from the other side, the choice is between the parents' values and the values of a random collection of kids. Most parents know which they prefer. As do I.

I was reminded of all this when I read an online discussion about whether and why one ought to have children and was struck by the number of people who took for granted serious conflict between parents and children. I gather from things my daughter has said about her online friends that they regarded her friendly relation to her parents as something unusual.

I cannot remember any point in my childhood at which my parents did not seem more nearly my sort of people than my age peers. The closest I came to rebellion, at some point in my teens, was informing my father that I had been feeling put upon, had considered the division of duties within the family, concluded that I was getting off very lightly considering how much more my parents had to do, and concluded that my feelings were due not to unfair treatment but to adolescence. I felt that he should be warned in case any of those unjustified feelings showed up in our interaction. There has been no point so far in my interaction with my children when they did not feel like "us" rather than "them." Both as a child and as a parent, I was in a family that fit Judith Harris' special case. I can see that parenting might be a lot less pleasant otherwise — in some cases frighteningly so.

Which gets me to another book, Leo Rosten's [*The Joys of Yiddish*](#). While structured as a list of words with detailed commentary, what it actually offers is a picture of Ashkenazi-American immigrant culture in the first half of the twentieth century, the world within which the author (and my parents) grew up. The special features of that world included both linguistic differences and a lot of ritual, things done at particular times for particular reasons.

My friend and ex-colleague Larry Iannacone, an economist who specializes in the economics of religion, long ago raised the question of how, in a society like the U.S. with open entry to the religion industry, a religion that imposes costly requirements on its adherents can survive. Why isn't such a religion always outcompeted by a new version that keeps everything else but dumps the costly restrictions, Judaism without kosher rules, LDS with beer and coffee? His answer was that the function of such restrictions is to make it more difficult for adherents to interact outside of the religious community, giving them an incentive to spend time and effort doing things that make

being part of that community more attractive. Getting people to do such things faces a public good problem, and public good problems are easier to solve if the public is small.

If children are brought up in an environment sufficiently special to make their age peers at school "them" rather than "us" and their parents, siblings and relatives "us" rather than "them," they end up identifying with the latter group. If the parents view their culture as superior to that of the surrounding society, as most parents probably do, they will see that as a good thing. Keeping their children is a benefit that may more than balance the costs of rules and rituals.

It does not have to be done through religion, of course, and in both of my cases it wasn't. Many years ago, my parents expressed concern as to whether they should have made more of an effort to bring us up in their ancestral religion, celebrated Hannukah instead of Christmas, perhaps sent me to Hebrew School. My reply was that I thought it better to be brought up, as I was, in the religion they actually believed in — 18th century rationalism, the world view of Adam Smith and David Hume.

There are costs as well as benefits to never being entirely socialized to the surrounding society. Regarding arguing as an entertaining and educational activity can quite easily get one in trouble with people who see an argument as a verbal fight. Yet, all things considered, I prefer the attitudes, values and worldview I was brought up with to those more generally prevailing.