

The philosophical baby
Alison Gopnik

Gopnik makes a true science out of child psychology

Gopnik's research is original, her findings are interesting and her writing is compelling. Experiments which she designed, and those of others which he describes to investigate the mental state of young children are really remarkable. She has done precisely what was called for in the field of psychiatry: replaced the speculation of pioneers such as Freud and Piaget with what appears to be proper scientific experimentation. I would have loved to read a bit more about the methodology. Deciding the duration of a child's attention span by watching its eyes would seem to be a fairly subjective judgment. I am quite sure that Dr. Gopnik has rigorous methodologies to avoid measurement error and subjectivity; it would have been interesting to read how her experiments were conducted. Equally interesting would be to read about her sample sizes and the background of her experimental subjects.

Dr. Gopnik comes from a large family and has several children herself. Unstated but highly significant is that it is a highly accomplished Jewish family. My three children didn't behave much like hers, but on the other hand, they are Gentiles and they have not accomplished as much since reaching adulthood. While anecdotal accounts add human interest to a book such as this, a researcher has to be careful to recognize the limited extent to which they can be generalized.

Her chapter on the Romanian orphans and the one entitled "Learning to Love" are both valuable and touching. The Romanian story indicates how malleable children are; the extent to which they can overcome extremely deprived childhoods. I have to admit to reserving a bit of skepticism about the reported rates of success – I am sure these children will be followed all of their lives. I also observed that adoptive Romanian babies I have met appear temperamentally and physically to be disproportionately Roma, whose genetic endowment would make them somewhat unrepresentative.

Learning to Love discusses how perceptive infants and young children are of the ways in which their caregivers are likely to react to them. She categorizes children as "secure," "avoidant," and "anxious," in reaction to whether their caregivers are quick and generous in giving them attention or whether they are likely to expect the kids to develop a "stiff upper lip." She attributes some of these characteristics to national childrearing practices in countries such as Germany and Japan. She talks about the ways in which these childrearing practices cascade down from generation to generation, one generation of anxious baby's leading to another. Turning things around, she talks about how children who themselves have had unhappy childhoods have been successful in analyzing what went wrong, resolved to make things better for their own children, and succeeded. These are interesting and useful observations.

Gopnik is fairly gentle with the Freudians, though she is quite clear that their time has passed. Specifically, she enjoins adults not to look for specific things which their parents did in order to fix blame for their own shortcomings. She says that while there are certainly statistical correlations between happiness as adults and certain childrearing practices, it would be impossible to make the correlation

person by person, and especially impossible to do it event by event within the lives of parent and child. She notes, accurately and dryly, that very few screwed up and unhappy adults are ever willing to attribute their problems to their own behavior.

Gopnik's biography is written in her intense, bespectacled portrait in the frontispiece of the book. However, for confirmation one can research the word "gopnik" in Russian and find that it is "(1) a slang word of Russian, pejorative designation of representatives of the city, or (2) Youth layer close to the criminal world, or with criminal behaviors, often undereducated, and originating from dysfunctional families. In this sense, the term is widely used in Russia and the former USSR." Dollars to doughnuts in the family is descended from those intensely intelligent, but equally intensely liberal refugees from the pogroms of a century ago.

She definitely writes within the context of a utopian worldview, one which would tap the public purse to support her convictions. A couple of her convictions are that Head Start is a resounding success and that intelligence has risen significantly among all children over the last century due to universal education. The latter is known as the Flynn effect. What she does not say is that Flynn himself discounts the practical impact of the Flynn effect, and that standardized test scores in America – the Scholastic Aptitude Test and the National Assessment of Academic Progress – have declined for five decades. With regard to preschool interventions, she talks more to the success of the Perry Preschool program in Ypsilanti Michigan than to the Head Start program, which to date has had 22 million enrollees. The Perry project statistics are much more compelling than those of Head Start, which would lead one to ask how reproducible the results are. To what extent were the children who enrolled and stayed with the program representative of the controls who did not, and to what extent is the involvement of extremely intelligent and motivated people responsible for the Perry program success? Interestingly, the only naysayers that Gopnik chooses to cite are Murray and Herrnstein, writing now almost 20 years ago in "The Bell Curve." Today's Wikipedia pretty much echoes what they said then... the effects do not seem to be very long-lasting.

Every author has their own biases, as I would quickly concede does every reviewer. I rate this book highly because of the originality of the thought and because of my conviction that Gopnik's work puts a scientific foundation in place for this essential line of research. If she is a little bit more optimistic than I, all for the good – I am sure it inspires her research.