

Book Review - The Nurture Assumption, by Judith Rich Harris

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GRAHAM SEIBERT

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This was a groundbreaking book when it appeared in 1999. Social scientists, especially behaviorists such as Watson and Skinner in the middle of the 20th century, attribute the differences in children's personalities and intelligence primarily to environment. At the end of the century there were separate academic disciplines for developmental psychology and behavioral genetics. The two rarely talked to each other, the first favoring the nurture explanation and the second favoring genetics, though only extremists would have attributed all of a person's characteristics to one or the other.

Harris had been a graduate student in developmental psychology – a behaviorist – but was dropped from the PhD program by B. F. Skinner himself when her health impaired her ability to participate fully. Thereafter, in the course of raising her own two daughters, she participated in editing books in the field and co-authored two books which appeared in 1984 and 1992 with a Robert Liebert.

Working outside of academia gave her the freedom to read broadly. Among the authors to whom she might not have been exposed working as a professor of childhood development were the sociobiologists such as Robert Trivers, EO Wilson, and Richard Dawkins, and in the field of language development such as Steven Pinker. She

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important environmental factor shaping a child's development is his or her peer group, not the parental home.

I, as a reviewer of 600 or so books, have likewise been given some freedom. Amazon trashed all of my reviews three years ago because I transgressed against the Covid orthodoxies being dictated by the Biden administration. The straw that broke the camel's back was Michael Neils' "The Indoctrinated Brain." I was able to recover most of the reviews and post them [on my own website](#).

Freed from Amazon's constraints, I am able to use graphics and videos, write longer reviews such as this one, and most importantly, in this review weave in observations from my own three marriages in three countries, six children and eight decades of life.

I was impressed the first time I read *The Nurture Assumption*, in the early 2000's, when my first three children were in high school and college. Reading it again, with my second family now in elementary and high school, in a distant country and a very different social setting, I can validate firsthand many of Harris' observations.

Spoiler alert: The plot unfolds slowly in this book. My short synopsis of Harris' thesis is that the way kids turn out is more a product of their genetic inheritance and the influence of peers, institutions such as school, and media such as television. For better or worse, parents usually don't matter that much. Parents are like a different species with a different culture, besides which, once they reach nursery school age, kids don't spend that much time with them.

It is not until chapter 6 that Harris reveals her central thrust: "The central question of this book is: how do children get socialized – how do they learn to behave like normal acceptable members of their society?" "Children have to learn to behave in a way that is appropriate for the society that they live in." "What children have to do first is to figure out what sort of people they are – which social category they belong in. Then they have to learn to behave like other members of their social category."

For those who want more substance, this review is organized by chapter, following the table of contents.

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1. "Nurture" is not the same as "environment"

This is where the author sets forth the thesis of the book. The reigning paradigm is: "Nature gives parents a baby; the end result depends on how they nurture it." She writes:

"What I changed my mind about with nurture, not environment this is not [saying] that everything is genetic; it isn't. The environment is just as important as the genes.... What I changed my mind about is whether "nurture" is really a synonym "environment".

"It was Freud who constructed, pretty much out of whole cloth, and elaborate scenario in which all of the psychological ills of adults could be traced back to things that happen to them when they were quite young and in which their parents

were heavily implicated.”

Harris writes that behaviorists Watson and Skinner disagreed with most of what Freud wrote, but agreed it was all a matter of environment and parenting.

Developmental psychology [socialization research] got started in the 1950s. What accounts for differences between children at various stages of their maturation? Correlations between parental practices and children’s outcomes defied (honest) statisticians. Nothing consistent was found.

The chapter concludes with three phenomena that caused Harris to question her belief that parental influence was dominant:

- 1) Children of immigrants grow up like their childhood peers, not their parents.
- 2) British public (viz, private) school children talk like other children in the schools. Not their parents, and not(!) the teachers in those schools, but the older children.
- 3) Children in all societies learn that behaving like parents would be impertinent, and language is inappropriate, and so on. They model themselves on older children.

having summarized what Harris does not believe, the chapter concludes. What she does believe comes later, mostly in Chapter Six, briefly summarized above.

2. The nature (and nurture) of the evidence

The behavioral geneticists found that heredity accounts for roughly 50% of the variations in personality. This is consistent with many other studies. Nonetheless, behavioral geneticists remain overwhelmingly outnumbered by socialization researchers, and the impact of genetics remains underappreciated.

Harris points to two generalizations first: on average, pleasant, competent parents tend to have pleasant, competent kids. But that does not prove that parents have any

influence other than genetic.

Harris presents a major theme. Parents tailor their child-rearing style to the individual child. It is not something a parent does to a child – it is something the child and parent do together.

Harris writes that autistic children do not appear delighted to see their parents. It is therefore difficult to be enthusiastic about them. Harris attributes autism to a defect in the brain; she states, per the received wisdom at the end of the 20th century, that autistic children are born that way. Research since publication would suggest investigating childhood vaccines as another likely cause.

Harris's second generalization is that children who are hugged are more likely to be nice, and children who are beaten are more likely to be unpleasant. True, but it once again begs the question of which comes first. It is a two-way street.

Harris reports that twins raised separately have the same kinds of relationships with their parents. The relationship appears to depend as much on the child as the parenting style.

Genes may affect the environment. A child's beauty is genetic, but beauty changes the child's environment – people's attitudes toward him or her. The opposite is true for ugly children. It is hard to separate the genetic and the environmental factors.

3. Nature, nurture, and none of the above

One odd finding was that pairs of people who grew up in the same home – siblings are no more alike in personality than pairs from different homes. Home environment has no measurable effect. Almost all the similarities between adult siblings can be attributed to shared genes.

The personalities children manifest in a home environment are affected by birth order

But these same kids show different personalities outside the house, unrelated to birth order.

Now that day care is used by families of all socio-economic strata, researchers find that being in daycare is not correlated with adult personalities. Other factors found not to have an influence were growing up with same-sex parents, without fathers and other factors. That is, after controlling for the obvious fact that kids in intact families tend to live in better neighborhoods, with better schools.

4. Separate worlds

Most children have two distinct environments: home and the world outside home. Within the home, children's interactions are influenced by birth order, among other things. Those interactions reflect the children's home personalities. Outside the home, they are different kids.

Children of immigrants, and others growing up with two or more native languages, "code switch" as they go back and forth among them. It is more than a simple matter of communication; what is being communicated is different. Parent to child vs. child to peers. Family environment vs. school environment. The vocabularies do not map clearly from one language to another because they are used in different contexts.

Harris' point is that the personalities children manifest also code-switch. A child will show one personality in one setting, and perhaps a quite different one in another. While it may be most easily observed in bilingual children, such code-switching occurs among family, school and playgroup environments. Kids employ different language registers. Harris' example is "Oh, shoot" vs. "Oh, shit." Harris' conclusion: if a kid appears improperly socialized outside the home, don't blame the parent.

"Context effects are a serious problem in developmental psychology.... They gave teenagers a questionnaire about their parents' child-rearing methods and also had their parents fill out the same questionnaire. The correlation between the parents'

reports and the kids' reports was only .07 – in other words, no agreement at all.

“Find a good [book] and it may help explain why your children behave the way they do while they are at home. My goal is to explain why they behave the way they do in the world outside the home – the world where they will spend the rest of their lives.”

5. Other times, other places

Privacy is a modern concept. In many other places in the world, it is not a factor, nor was it a consideration in ours until recent centuries. Families lived, conducted business, cooked, bathed and made love in a single room, surrounded by children and relatives.

As men started to work outside the house, children could be regarded more as valuable in themselves, not merely possessions, economic assets. At the same time sanitation and nutrition improved and parents' long-term attachments would not so often end with the child's death.

Traditional societies are not concerned about what the experts say about discipline, nutrition, children working, privacy and the like. The kids turn out all right – better copies of their parents than in western nations. Per Harris, well-off parents read expert advice and follow it, then participate in research designed to show that the advice is correct.

“And this whole precarious, circular structure rests on a set of assumptions about children and parents that are peculiar to our culture and our time. A set of assumptions written in sand.”

6. Human nature

Harris' discussion of human evolution notes that we have always been tribal. Caring those close to us, murderous towards outsiders.

What distinguishes humans from our primate precursors is mind reading. With the exception of autistic people, we are able to discern what others are thinking. It gives the ability to coordinate, and also to deceive one another.

Children are socialized in groups more than families. A good thing, as parents could often be killed in a hostile world.

7. Us and them

By the age of one, children are able to categorize people into groups by gender and age. Race takes a good deal longer. Groups are salient only if there are two or more of them. Harris writes that "All it takes to produce group contrast effects is to divide people into two groups." The groups see themselves as different, and members tend toward the central tendencies of their own group.

Differentiation is an opposite force operating within groups "when they are not engaged in hostilities with other groups." Leaders, clowns, nerds and so on emerge.

Harris writes: "the emotional power of groupness comes from a long evolutionary history in which the group was our only hope of survival and members of the group were our sisters and brothers, our children and parents, our husbands and wives."

Harris writes "to a child, and adult might as well be a member of another species." She advances her thesis that children are socialized primarily by their peers rather than their parents. Children recognize themselves as groups – separate groups, especially boys and girls – and learn to conform to the norms of the group.

8. In the company of children

Children are born with certain characteristics. Their genes predispose them to develop a certain type of personality. But the environment can change them. Not "nurture" – not the environment their parents provide – but the outside the home

environment, the environment that they share with their peers.

Harris draws on observations from the animal kingdom: "It was only after warm-blooded creatures began to care for their young, says Eibl-Eibesfeldt, that long-lasting affectionate relationships between individuals became possible."

Harris offers observations about the importance of peers.

a) Rhesus monkeys that are reared from birth without a mother, but kept in cages with three or four other infant monkeys, turn out to be reasonably normal adults. They are miserable as babies, but by the time they are at one-year-old they are behaving normally.

b) Monkeys reared with mothers but without peers are happy enough, but have serious problems later on, when they are caged with other monkeys.

c) Monkeys raised by themselves without mothers were highly abnormal.

She offers several examples of how the same observations can be made about people. Those without peers include kids from orphanages who are shuttled around a lot, prodigies who are very unlike children who might be their peers, and tragic circumstances such as war orphans who had only each other for company. In all cases the presence of peers was essential for the children to develop into somewhat normal adults.

In traditional societies, per Eibl-Eibesfeldt, "It is in such playgroups that children are truly raised. The child's socialization occurs mainly within the playgroup."

Since most children are raised in their parents' culture, it is hard to tell whether parents or peers have the greater influence. It is the exceptions that prove the rule. The child of a woman abducted in a raid on an enemy village would be ill advised to copy the social behavior of her mother. The daughter of a British psycholinguist was "speaking black English like a native" after four months of attending nursery school in Oakland.

California.

Harris writes "what I am describing here is not at all like relationships between individuals. The capacity to form dyadic relationships is present at birth. Groupness takes longer to develop." However, "over the course of our species history, many more people have died for their group than have died for their personal relationships." There are two subsystems, one for dyadic relationships, and one for group things. Later in the book she points out that girls are more prone to dyadic relationships, boys to group relationships. "School age girls usually have friends, not groups – they split up into twosomes and threesomes."

"Little girls want to be like other girls (and not like boys); little boys want to be like other boys (and not like girls)."

"During middle childhood, children become more alike, more similar to their peers of the same sex." "The public personality is the one that the child adopts when he or she is not at home. It is the one that will develop into the adult personality."

9. The transmission of culture

Culture is transmitted by both parents and peers. In most cases they are similar, so it is hard to tell. Harris writes "The only way we can tell which environmental factors are having an effect is to look at cases in which they do not work together, and that is why I keep coming back to the immigrant family. When the parents belong to one culture and the rest of the community belongs to a different culture, we can at least distinguish the effects of the parents from the effects of outside the family influences."

What happens, at least for a time, is that the children become bicultural. In effect, they become citizens of two different countries, that of their parents and that of the [host culture]. This reviewer notes from personal experience that this effect can happen within a single nationality. The dominant liberal culture of Bethesda Maryland overwhelmed the conservative culture favored by the father of the house.

Deaf children hearing parents tend to be absorbed into deaf culture in schools for the deaf. Those with some hearing and speech may tend to stop speaking.

Harris makes her point: aside from heredity, there have been four suggested ways that culture could be passed on:

- Child-rearing methods.
- Imitation of parents.
- Imitation of other adults in society.
- Via children's peer groups

Harris concludes that the last – peer groups – has to be the dominant factor.

Here insight: "A child's goal is not to become a successful adult. A child's goal is to be a successful child." "Children are not incompetent members of the adult's society: they are competent members of their own society, which has its own standards and its own culture."

"Before the invention of television, the kids at (British boarding schools) had little contact with adult culture; what went on in the world outside the school had little impact on them." Harris makes the point throughout the book that the British upper class had very little contact with their children, but by placing them in elite schools such as Harrow and Eton ensured that they acquired a culture and accent very similar to that of their parents.

Television appeared on the scene when this reviewer was in elementary school. It had a profound effect on his younger siblings and especially upon his Millennial children. Interestingly, the online media to which his second family is now exposed is not nearly as homogeneous as was television. Generation Z is not as uniformly brainwashed as were Generation X and the Millennials.

Parents also belong to a peer group and conform accordingly. Harris cites methods physical punishment, allowing children into the parents' bed, separate bedrooms, permissible toys and so on as decisions influenced by the parental culture.

10. Gender roles

"During the formative years of childhood, a girl becomes more similar to other girls and a boy becomes more similar to other boys." "A boy's masculinity and the girl's femininity are shaped by the environment they share with their peers rather than the environment they share with their parents." This reviewer adds that the militant feminism of his Millennial daughters was something they learned from their Bethesda peers. His Gen Alpha daughters, of a different generation in a different country, show no signs of it.

"The most important years for group socialization are the years of middle childhood from 6 to 12. Children spend not much of their free time with peers of their own sex. They socialize each other."

Girls and boys are different. "As little girls get older, they make more and more suggestions to their playmates, and their playmates – if they are other girls – become more and more amenable to them." "Little boys get less and less amenable to following suggestions, especially if the suggestions come from girls" "Little girls start avoiding little boys; it is not much fun to play with people who won't listen to your suggestions and to grab your toys without even a by your leave."

"Male groups tend to be larger and more hierarchical." "Girls are more concerned than boys with maintaining group cohesion and cooperative, mutually supportive friendships. Their friendships are more intimate than those of boys." "Boys groups tend to be hierarchical." "Girls' relationships tend to be close and exclusive."

The separateness of boys and girls becomes awkward for girls when they reach adolescence. They now want to be accepted by boys, but "For a teenage girl to have

any sort of status in a group whose dominant members are boys, either she must be good at something they value or she must be pretty."

11. Schools of children

Children conform to the culture of their school, or their clique within the school. If there are too few of a minority to form a clique, they adopt the culture of the major. This reviewer was a trustee, parent and substitute teacher in Washington DC private schools. These schools all embraced diversity as a primary objective. One school, Edmund Burke, had large enough numbers of Jewish, Black and ordinary white students that each was able to form its own group with its own standards. Two Episcopal schools had few enough Black children that those who could adopted the culture of the white kids. Those who could not simply floundered. The administrators were studiously oblivious to such cultural issues. Minority students' academic performance was never discussed at the board level. Behavioral issues were addressed one at a time, never systematically.

Harris writes "I believe that a teacher's job is not to emphasize the cultural differences among the students (that can be done at home by the parents) but to downplay them. A teacher's job is to unite students by giving them a common goal." This is quite the opposite of what the DEI initiatives in Washington area private schools attempted to do. They "celebrated diversity" to the detriment of the diverse students.

12. Growing up

"Wanting to have higher status – wanting to be like a bigger kid – goes on *within* the group." "To a kid, grownups are not a superior version of us; grownups are *them*."

Humans are unique as a species in that we remain small throughout a prolonged childhood, then suddenly blossom in size as we attain sexual maturity. That made it possible throughout our evolutionary history to distinguish two groups: children and

adults. Breasts and menarche marked the transition for women. For men, most tribes devised rites of passage, as boys became ready to assume the roles of hunter, warrior and eventually husband and father.

Since the advent of formal education, especially university education, we have devised a third, in-between stage of people who have attained sexual maturity but are not yet members of adult society. They are not ready to work or assume family responsibilities. Teen-agers and young adults have their own culture, their own music, their own amusements. They are rebellious. They are innovative. They respond to peer pressure more than pressure from their parents.

13. Dysfunctional families and problem kids

Harris continues her argument that the determining factors are the genetics of behavior and the peer environment. Most children can benefit from being placed in a better peer environment, though some of them are beyond help.

She argues that the presence or absence of a father does not much matter, control for other factors, and neither does divorce. Failure in marriage is a heritable trait, associated with impulsiveness, indifference and other genetic traits.

I add two factors. First, a child's health may be influenced by medical conditions and interventions. The one under the microscope as I write is vaccination. RFK Jr. promises a piece on autism next month. The second is the neighborhood. This reviewer's Millennial children grew up in a neighborhood of career women. These mothers did not need their husbands' income and did not seem to greatly appreciate husbands' contributions to raising children or keeping house. The children of the neighborhood absorbed the feminist message that men were at best inessential. Two decades on, few of them appear to be successful as partners or parents.

My conclusion would be that it is important to keep two peer groups in mind when selecting a neighborhood: that of the parents as well as that of the children.

14. What parents can do

Parenting advice runs in fads. The fad of the moment is to be a pal to your children. There is not much evidence that it works as well as the traditional regime of discipline.

Harris' advice is, "Don't worry about what the advice-givers tell you." "How they turn out is not a reflection on you,"

15. The nurture assumption on trial

Harris summarizes five incorrect ideas:

- a) The natural environment of the child has been assumed to be the nuclear family - the arrangement that was so popular during the first half of the 20th century. Wrong.
- b) It is wrong to assume that a child's job is to learn how to behave like all the other people in his or her society. No. Children have to learn to behave like other people in their own social category.
- c) It was assumed that learned behavior was carried like a back pack from one place to another. Wrong. Children of every age behave differently in different social contexts.
- d) The power of the genes has not been given its due. Kids are different from birth.
- e) The fifth mistake is to ignore our evolutionary history and ignore the fact that our ancestors lived in groups. The most dangerous creatures in the world have always been members of other groups. This reviewer calls attention to the problems caused by unassimilable immigrants in developed countries.

The group is the natural environment of the child. Children identify with the group and others like themselves and take on the norms of the group.

The book ends with this observation:

“When you think about childhood you think about your parents. Blame it on the relationship department of your mind, which has usurped more than its rightful share of your thoughts and memories.

As for what’s wrong with you: don’t blame it on your parents.”

Conclusion: That’s the summary of a very useful book. The key message is that children are socialized by their peers. The most valuable thing a parent can do is to ensure that the neighborhood and school environments provide children with peers whose influence will shape them into the adults their parents would hope to see.

[Graham](#)



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