Summary and Analysis of “Where is the Child’s Environment?”

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Summary

In “Where is the Child's Environment? A Group Socialization Theory of Development,” Harris (1995/2011) investigates the factors that form a child's personality, and ultimately comes to the conclusion that peer influence and genetics are the most significant contributors to the development of personality, not parents. Harris reaches the conclusion that genetics account for about 50% of personality characteristics (and acknowledges that this number could be off by as much as 20%), while the home environment in which people are raised accounts for only about 10%, leaving roughly 30% of personality variances open to explanation (1995/2011, pp. 429-430).

The writer compares anecdotes referring to humans and other primates raised without both parents and peers, and looks at different styles of family models across cultures. She also refers to a number of studies of pairs of children with varying degrees of genetic similarity (identical twins, biological siblings, non-relatives) reared both together (using adoptive siblings to represent non-relatives raised together) and separately. This sample of studies shows results using both the children's home environments and genetics as controlled and responding variables (Harris, 1995/2011).

Throughout the article Harris (1995/2011) addresses questions such as “Does the family environment matter?” (p. 428), “Who socializes the child?” (p. 431), “Is the family a group?” (p. 432), and examines “Dyadic relationships versus group processes” (p. 436), citing research in each topic to support her original claim. More easily finding a niche outside of the family once full grown, or increasing diversity within the family, are both given as possible evolutionary reasons for peers to have more influence on a child's personality than family (Harris, 1995/2011, pp. 438-439).
Analysis

The sheer number, as well as diversity of the studies and anecdotes Harris (1995/2011) draws from builds a strong argument to support her claim. By comparing identical twins that were raised both together and apart, it becomes possible to control for genetics and manipulate environment, leaving variance in personality as the responding variable. By comparing adoptive siblings, it is possible to control for home environment while manipulating genetics, leaving variance in personality as the responding variable.

By referring to ways of organizing the family unit outside of western society, Harris simultaneously takes into account her own cultural bias, introduces English speaking readers to concepts they may not have previously considered, and treats culture as a manipulated variable of sorts. Harris is able to demonstrate thorough investigation by drawing the same conclusion approaching the topic from multiple angles.

It is worth noting that Harris is not arguing that parents have no role in a child's development. According to Rutter’s 1979 study, “An early attachment to a caregiver appears to be a requirement for normal social development” (as cited in Harris 1995/2011, p. 435). The implications of her claim are simply that the development of personality in particular is not necessarily a significant part of the parental role. There are many other elements of a child's development that may still depend on the parent, such as communication skills and self-care skills. She also acknowledges that the parent may have some indirect effect on personality by influencing which peers the child chooses (Harris, 1995/2011, p. 435).
References
