

Debate of Judith Rich Harris' Group Socialization Theory

For Presentation in Family Sciences Undergraduate Courses

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Instructors of parenting and family life education courses debated “pro” and “con” arguments about Harris' Group Socialization theory, which holds that a child's peer group is the major environmental influence on his/her development. A CD-ROM entitled “Group Socialization Theory: A New Way to Debate Nature & Nurture” was displayed or distributed to students to study before the debate. Following the instructors' debate, students discussed the issues. Student participation was high; student support for GS theory was low. The project enhanced the study of parenting and the question of nature vs nurture. It also introduced students to other fields such as social psychology and behavioral genetics.

Explanation of GS Theory

Group socialization (GS) theory posits that within a child's peer groups “the psychological characteristics a child is born with become permanently modified by the environment” (Harris, 1995, p. 482). Various peer groups may be the preschool or child care group, the elementary school group, or the adolescent group. The same-age and -sex groups in the elementary school years provide greatest influence, with peer pressure at its height. Adolescent peer groups are next in influence.

The processes by which children develop into adulthood are genetic transmission, indirect genetic influence (which refers to behaviors by other people, including parents, caused by genetic traits), socialization by peer groups, and influence by parent peer groups on child peer groups. Key to GS theory is the process of socialization by peer groups.

Presenters

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Harris, J. R. (1995). Where is the child's environment? A group socialization theory of development. *Psychological Review*, 102, 458-489.

Harris J. R. (1998). *The nurture assumption: Why children turn out the way they do*. New York: The Free Press.

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The Nurture Assumption by Judith Rich Harris (1998) has spurred debate about socialization, personality development, and parenting among scientists across disciplines. The book has also garnered publicity about parenting styles in the mass media. For the project described in this workshop, instructors presented a debate of GS theory to students in parenting and family life education. In undergraduate classrooms, debate and controversy can increase learners' interest in course material (Martin, Engelbrecht, & Chenoweth, 1994) as well as communicate professional standards for analyzing information.

Explanation of GS Theory

GS Theory was introduced in a lengthy article in *Psychological Review* (Harris, 1995). Since that time, the theory's author has expanded her comments to book form in *The Nurture Assumption*, published by Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster and has received wide publicity (Gladwell, 1998). In *The Nurture Assumption*, Harris (1998) described researchers' stumbling block in sorting out nature and nurture as being the "nurture assumption" which she said is "the notion that parents are the most important part of the child's environment and can determine, to a large extent, how the child turns out" (p. 15). Harris portrayed this assumption as a product of academic psychology (p. 15) and reflective only of American culture (p. 4). Historically, children have been quite separate from their parents.

According to GS theory, parents are the primary agents of socialization for the child up to the age of about 5 or 6. Second, parents remain the important influences for any activity that is family-based. Third, parents' in-family influence is lifelong and remains constant as long as the child continues to live or (later) visit in the family home. These influences are so well established in American culture that they lead both writers and readers of research to what Harris calls the faulty nurture assumption that parents are the primary influence on children. GS theory maintains, however, that parents are primary *only* in these three ways. In terms of the child's personality development to adulthood, the primary influence is *not* parents; it is the childhood peer groups.

Team-teaching Debate Project

GS theory was selected for presentation in an oral debate format. As a teaching team, the instructors presented material about theories of socialization. One instructor defended the traditional view of parent as major influence on child's development. The other instructor defended GS theory.

Index cards were distributed before the debate so that students could record a question for the debaters. Every student had at least one question or comment. Students were invited to question the debaters about their positions and challenge their arguments. Afterward, the instructors dropped their debating roles and led the students in discussion.

One of the instructors created an electronic curriculum module called "Group Socialization Theory: A New Way to Debate Nature & Nurture" for student review before the scheduled debate (which was conducted during a regular class meeting). The module was created in the form of a CD-ROM. The curriculum program was written in the format of HTML files. This is a file format compatible with any computer with an Internet browser installed. Thus, all campus computers could display the program and the majority of students' home computers could, also. HTML proved to be a superior choice to presenting the material in a particular brand of software such as Power Point. The total file space was 4.11 megabytes. The CD-ROM was determined to be the most economical storage medium. While the cost of the CD-ROMs in time and materials was significant, all were returned and could be re-used. Materials were created with Microsoft FrontPage 98 (a user-friendly HTML editor), Gif Animator (a low-end animation editor provided by Microsoft), HP CD-Writer Plus (Hewlett Packard software bundled with a CD burner), and SureThing CD Labeler (software for creating CD paper labels on a laser printer).

Students were very receptive to studying this topic on computer. One factor was novelty; in family studies courses, the students have not had access to curriculum materials prepared for electronic media. Another factor was the use of computer animation to illustrate some concepts of GS theory.

Results

Undergraduate students were receptive to a debate. This style of presentation was new and stimulating to them. Participation was high, both in the questioning debaters and in class discussion.

Although the great majority of the students voted in favor of the more traditional outlook of parenting and against GS theory, many acknowledged that they were glad to know about GS theory. A representative comment was: "Modeling parents is more important than peers, but Harris is right that peers are influential."

Questions submitted on index cards included: "Assuming GS theory is correct, wouldn't parents still be able to influence their children by screening the peer group? Making sure it is a "good" peer group?" and "Is this a product of how society is changing — could this be because we have allowed peer group to have such influence?"

Other topics that students were interested in discussing in terms of GS theory included: "day care vs home care," "homeschooling," (single most frequently mentioned issue), "alcoholic families," "children with disabilities," and "coming-out."

Discussion

As a controversial theory in the popular press, GS theory was an "attention getter" with undergraduates. The controversy provided a stark contrast to other theories presented in parenting classes; its counterintuitiveness was also very different from other ideas discussed in class.

The debate format itself exploited dualistic thinking characteristic of younger college students in that two opposing ideas were expressed strongly. Many students looked at the question as either-or: either traditional theory or new theory, either nature or nurture. But the debate also supported what is for many students a progression to dialectical thinking. Some students looked for the "gray" area that new theories challenge us with. Even for students who rejected GS theory, exposure to it promoted critical thinking as was demonstrated in follow-up discussions and students' written questions.

Consideration of GS theory provided a new way to approach nature vs nurture. A dualistic view would call for clear-cut separation between biology and environment. More realistically, we ask students to consider (a) interaction of nature and nurture, and (b) developmental unknowns that elude classification. At the level of dualistic thinking, "interaction" may mean nothing more than "a little

of this, a little of that." One might assume a "mix" of nature and nurture rather than imagining the potential of nature shaping nurture and nurture shaping nature. Similarly, the idea of developmental unknowns requires imagination and freedom from conventional thinking. Whether this debate actually moved forward the more complex questions of interaction and developmental unknowns, we cannot guarantee. But at the least it provided one more opportunity to present the concepts.

An area of dissatisfaction for the instructors was discussion time for the concept of heritability. The meaning of heritability eludes many students. One way to address this problem may be to create computer animations to illustrate the concept. Students' strong positive reaction to the GS animations suggest that this may be a worthwhile investment of time.

Conclusions

A debate of GS theory was used to good effect in the undergraduate classroom. The debate enhanced the study of theories in the family field and also introduced students to other fields such as social psychology and behavioral genetics. Electronic files of curriculum material adequately introduced students to Harris's theory and provided a framework for discussion of nature vs nurture.

By expressing clearly delineated positions, the instructors illustrated how theorists and researchers may find themselves at odds with other professionals. By dropping the debater roles for the class discussion, the instructors illustrated how professionals may seek common ground in comparing their viewpoints. The use of instructors as debaters allowed students to observe controversy without having to take a stand or defend a position.

Implications

Undergraduate study can be enlivened and strengthened by the introduction of new viewpoints. University instructors can utilize new theories in undergraduate curricula both to explore the value of the theories and to model for students methods by which new ideas can be analyzed.

REFERENCES

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The Assumptions of Group Socialization Theory

Component	Assumption
Context-specific socialization and personality development	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Children learn separately how to behave at home and how to behave outside the home. 2. Personality consists of an innate core plus acquired, context-specific behavioral systems. 3. As children get older, the outside-the-home behavioral system takes precedence over the inside-the-home system and eventually becomes part of the adult personality.
Sources of outside-the-home socialization	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Primates are predisposed, for evolutionary reasons, to affiliate with and adapt to a group. 2. Humans have the ability to identify with more than one group; the group identification that is salient at any given moment depends on social context. 3. The group that children identify with when they are outside the home is the peer group—a group of others who share socially relevant characteristics such as age, gender, ethnicity, and (in adolescence) abilities and interests. 4. Identification with a group entails taking on the group's attitudes and norms of behavior. This is a within-group process that results in assimilation—the group members become more alike.
Transmission of culture via group processes	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Parents do not transmit their culture directly to their children. Culture is transmitted from the parents' peer group (and from other cultural sources) to the children's peer group. 2. Children transfer behavior learned at home to the peer group only if it is shared by, and approved by, the majority of members of the peer group. Children who come from atypical homes do not transfer their atypical home behaviors to the peer group. 3. Children's peer groups create their own culture by selecting and rejecting various aspects of the adult culture and by making cultural innovations of their own. During childhood, children move through a series of these child-created cultures.
Between-group processes that widen differences between groups	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In-group favoritism and out-group hostility derive from adaptive mechanisms acquired through evolution and found in humans and other primates. 2. In humans, in-group favoritism and out-group hostility produce group contrast effects, which widen differences between groups or create differences if there were none to begin with.
Within-group processes that widen differences among individuals	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Status hierarchies within the group—differences in dominance or social power—exist in all primate groups. Differences in status tend to persist and, in humans, may have lasting effects on personality. 2. Social comparisons within the peer group give children information about their own strengths and weaknesses and result in typecasting of individuals by other members of the group.
Assimilation and differentiation	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Within-group assimilation and between-group contrast are most likely to occur when group identity is salient. Group identity is most salient when other groups are present. 2. Within-group assimilation and within-group differentiation are not mutually exclusive. Children can become more similar to their peers in some ways (socialization) and, over the same period of time, less similar in other ways.