



Arkadiusz Wąsiński

University of Lodz, Poland

ORCID 0000-0003-1867-8541

Genes or nurture? Discussion of the wrong question

Geny czy wychowanie? Dyskusja nad niewłaściwie postawionym pytaniem

Abstract: The paper presents a polemics with a thesis formulated by J. Harris that group socialization theory is an alternative to family nurture. The thesis, indeed, “annihilates” the nurture category and the existing achievements of education sciences off the scientific discourse. The text focuses on an analysis of consistency of arguments regarding the main aspects of the theory in question, identified at four levels of tensions between: genes and environment, child and adult, family and peer group, and being raised in the family and socialization in peer group. The inconsistencies and overinterpretations, expressed by J. Harris in her “systemic” depreciation of child-rearing, inspired some reflections about the possible roles of nurture viewed in the paradigm of biological and spiritual evolution synthesis.

Keywords: genes, heredity, personality traits, environment, upbringing, socialization, biological evolution, spiritual evolution.

Introduction

The starting point to a discussion around the question: “Genes or nurture?” is a one-sided argumentation adopted by J. Harris (Harris, 1998); which excludes child-rearing and primary group socialization from the scientific discourse within human sciences. Adopting the perspective of behavioral genetics, Harris reaches a conclusion (which she treats as an objective truth) that family nurture is a centuries-old myth. A myth, it should be added, that is not viewed as a metaphor or a voice in dispute (Symotiuk, 2007), but

is rather seen from the perspective of oddly understood scientific realism which excludes child-rearing from social phenomena. The scientific concept developed in this spirit cancels the role of educational and socialization activities undertaken by adults and other (regardless of age) family members. At the same time, it declares the primary role of socialization in peer groups.

The intention of this paper was to provide a critical scientific judgement of a new theory of upbringing, nor to promote well-known and recognized pedagogical theories, but to initiate a discussion about the relevance for the existing pedagogical knowledge of theories developed as a paradigm shift in explaining and understanding the nurture reality in family and outside-the-family environments. Thus, the text aims at presenting a reflection on J. Harris' thesis which undermines the existence of nurture in the theory of group socialization (promoted based on evolutionary psychology) as a new paradigm of viewing influence within family and peer groups. The thesis proposed by J. Harris leads to "the Copernican revolution" in social sciences and research into nurture and socialization within family and peer groups. Conclusions drawn from it cancel the scientific value of the nurture theory and, indirectly, also pedagogy as a scientific discipline. Failure to discuss this bold thesis in the pedagogical discourse is, in my opinion, a counter effective strategy which may imply a tacit consent to her arguments and conclusions.

Thus, presented as empirically proven, objective truth, the controversial thesis about the so called "nurture myth" should be investigated. In this context, doubts raised by B. Śliwerski regarding the rationale behind comparing certain theories which are inconsistent in terms of ontological and epistemological assumptions, gain a new meaning (Śliwerski, 2005). Even though it remains relevant, as proven by A. Folkierska (1990) and E. Paszkiewicz (1983), it is not applicable when evolutionary psychologists assume the cognitive imbalance of theories formulated within distinct paradigms for understanding reality. The dispute, however, is not about the cognitive value of specific theories but rather nurture as such. Thus, it partly leads to questioning the interdisciplinary theoretical arrangements which treat nurture as a central category (Hejnicka-Bezwińska, 1989) and acknowledging the supreme, meta-theoretical status of the group socialization theory which "exposes" the illusion of nurture.

The question posed by the author explores the basics of thinking about nurture in the context of even more basic question about the nature of people and their ability to discover the axiological and ethical base of the meanings that give sense to personal choices and acts in the situation of encounter. J. Harris' question about the supremacy of genes or nurture,

as “offensive” and too audacious for pedagogues, because it “annihilates the existing research and theoretical achievements and practice of educational work”, can be treated in this context as intellectual challenge to a discussion. The discussion which would open – at least, it is my impression – some new perspectives of research inspirations. The inspirations that reconstruct the existing pedagogical theories in new, interdisciplinary paradigms of scientific investigations.

Assumptions and categories of J. Harris’ theory of group socialization

The research paradigm adopted by J. Harris locates explanations of mechanisms and the strength of nurture and socialization effects (in family and outside-the-family environment) on children’s behavior and personality within the theoretical assumptions of human biological evolution (Harris, 1995, 2006, 2000). This paradigm provides a wide context for interpretation of the phenomenon in question, focused on capturing the impact of genetic and environmental factors on behavioral patterns in children in family and outside-the-family social situations in the light of noticeable individual differences (Harris, 2011). The analysis of the main aspects of Harris’ group socialization theory focuses on four levels of tensions between: I. Genes and environment, II. Child and adult, III. Family and peer group, IV. Being raised in the family and socialization in peer group.

I. Genes and environment

According to evolutionary psychology, the tension between genes and environment is crucial to modeling the behavior of individuals. It is defined as a result of interaction between “evolved adaptations” and “environmental input that triggers the development and activation of these adaptations” (Buss, 2001, p. 40).

The role of genes is defined in the laws of behavior genetics, which describe the regularities of: all behavioral traits (human behavior) being heritable, the effect of genes on behavioral traits being greater than the effect of being raised in the family (as shared environment), and insignificance of genes and family in explaining a substantial portion of variation in complex human behavioral traits (Turkheimer, 2000, p. 160). Typical behavioral trait is also conditioned by many genetic variations, each of which is responsible for a small degree of behavioral variability. An example of such trait is „a social outcome, such as educational attainment, that is plausibly related to a person’s behavioral dispositions” (Chabris et al., 2015, p. 305). The role of the environment is, in turn, expressed in the possibility for an individual

to develop one of several potential life strategies. The environment forces the individual to use the most adequate of the strategies included in their genotype. The choice of one of the potential strategies is made in the early stage of life based on interactions with other people and first social experiences. This choice eliminates the possibility of developing other potential life strategies. Therefore, early social experiences determine the scope and dynamics of the development of the adopted strategy later in life (Buss, 2001, 412-413).

For Harris, the starting point for reflections on the mechanisms and strength of nurturing and socialization effects is heredity. She sees it as a combination of direct and indirect genetic effects (Harris, 1998). Direct effects are identified with inheriting physical and mental features coded in the genetic structure of the body. Heredity accounts for 100% of the resemblance between parent and offspring, and for 50% of the variation among the offspring (Harris, 2006, 2011). Indirect effects are “the effects of the effects”, that is, environmental responses to individual characteristics. The analysis of variability of these characteristics indicates a significant role of direct genetic effects in developing thereof. Harris argues that even though the variation of characteristics is determined more or less equally by genes and environment (50 percent heredity, 50 percent environment), the environmental component can be additionally divided between “pure” environmental influence and indirect effects of genes. She believes that this decreases radically the role of the environment in the process of development of characteristics programmed in an individual’s genetic code (Harris, 1995, 2006, 2011).

It seems that J. Harris focuses too much on shared heritable characteristics and overlooks the importance of individual differences. Regardless of the common traits which they share similar to their genetical relatives, individuals are aware that they are not anyone’s clones but a conscious, distinct person. It is connected with differences between people, which include personality traits, temper, intelligence or individual adaptation strategies used in different contexts (Michalski, Shackelford, 2010). Individual differences are responsible for individual specializing in various tasks and social roles; they influence, in a way that is hard to predict, one’s strategies for survival in a group (Maestripieri and Boutwell, 2022). They are essential for nurture as an influence that helps form the unique individuality of a person, expressed in that person’s creative personal development and leading over time to a deeper understanding of this process in relation to the world (Lerner, 2021).

II. Child and adult

J. Harris says that main differentiators of the environment's effect on an individual are spontaneous mechanisms of self-categorization and identification. They are responsible for the basic division of the social reality into two distinct worlds – of children and grown-ups. They form the coexisting and – in some sense – complementary aspects of the central category of group socialization.

Self-categorization is a mechanism of recognizing that some traits can be found in other people (Harris, 1998, 2011). Recognizing similarities and differences happens through social comparison as one verifies the image of self against others in the peer group. The awareness of similarities with other people evokes the sense of psychological closeness (identification) with them and psychological distance to those who possess opposing traits. This mechanism is responsible for viewing the world according to the logic of similarities and differences, integrating and antagonizing; the logic which motivates people to group according to traits they value, e.g. age, gender, race, school, social status. For Harris, the main division line runs between children and adults: “Children don't perceive adults as people like themselves, not if there are any other children around to make the distinction clear. To a child, an adult might as well be a member of another species. Grownups know everything and can do whatever they want” (Harris, 1998, p. 163). Identification with a group requires self-categorization and can be a one-sided, unrequited by the group sense of psychological closeness. The author emphasizes the importance of child's identification – in situation of acceptance as well as rejection by the group – as the mechanisms that leave permanent marks in their psyche and influence their general life status and adaptability in adult life (Harris, 1998).

According to the paradigm of the group socialization theory, J. Harris narrows down her reflection into the self-categorization and identification mechanisms to peer groups only, which is not the complete picture of reality. Of course, the generational difference between an adult and a child is the basis on which the self-categorization mechanisms is triggered to form the child's identity expressed in the division logics: “I am not a grown-up — I am a child”. However, it does not mean a mental close-up of the child exclusively to their peer group. According to this logic, the child sees that it has similarity- and difference-based relations with peers and only difference-based relations with the representatives of other generations. This, however, is not the case — at least during family meals which are regular, repetitive events of family discourse and the most natural interactions between children and

adults (Blum-Kulka, 2017; Caronia and Colla, 2024). I do not find in J. Harris theory arguments that prove the thesis that children are not able to notice some of their own traits in other adults. Thus, the question of possible identification not only with peers but also with adults based on e.g. emotional, axiological and moral sensitivity, strategy of survival in a group or shared biographical experiences, remains open. The ability to identify with peers who show similar traits does not exclude similar ability to identify with the grown-ups (Berenson et al., 2005). J. Harris' understanding of identification as psychological closeness does not justify narrowing it down to one's own generation. Such closeness can be experiences with individuals from other generations, including adults.

III. Family and peer group

Being part of peer groups is presented by J. Harris as being among "own people", on equal terms and rules. There is no social distance that is found in relationships with adults. The world of the peer group is presented as a safe space to gain experiences related to social-cultural norms, patterns, values and desired ways of participating in the social life. Attractiveness of peer group makes it the group a child identifies with and aspires to.

According to Harris, identification with the group leads to the child's readiness to submit to the peer group's requirements and, consequently, to internalization of the group's way of thinking and conduct (Harris, 2000). The sharp "edges get smoothed off their personalities", their behaviors become similar to the ones accepted in the group and, what is even more important, habitual – they become part of their personality. This process shapes the part of the child's personality which is adopted when participating in social life outside the family. Harris believes that "public personality" of the child is the one that will develop into the adult personality (Harris, 1998, p. 194). This leads her to a controversial conclusion that parents have no influence on the child's personality: "What group socialization theory implies is that children would develop into the same sort of adults if we left them in their homes, their schools, their neighborhoods, and their cultural or subcultural groups, but switched all the parents around" (Harris, 1998, p. 378, 1995). In this sense, the theory of group socialization is for Harris an actual alternative to family rearing.

The unambiguous and indisputable tone of J. Harris's thesis does not resonate with the relative caution of researchers who adopt the perspective of evolutionary psychology (Kruger et al., 2023). They emphasize two issues: a) the developmental environments in early childhood and adolescence play

a role in forming conditional adaptations to the environmental realities, used in adulthood; b) the relative role of these developmental environments and genetics in the formation of behavioral traits in adulthood is still being discussed (Barbaro et al., 2017). Regardless of the evolutionary psychology paradigm, it is worth mentioning that to accept J. Harris' thesis would mean to acknowledge parent's social and cultural "transparency". It is contrary to parental experience (as well as research) in which everyday presence of the parents, their interactions with the child and shared living space within the family contributes to the formation of the child's biographical experiences, the development of the child's predispositions and interests, axiological and moral sensitivity, or identity considered in the context of inherited socio-demographic and ethnic-racial traits (Wang et al., 2023).

IV. Being raised in the family and socialization in peer group

Heredity of traits creates a situation where parents have to adapt their communication and rearing style to their child's character. As a result, parents do not follow a fixed and developed child-rearing model, but rather an unspecified and ambiguous vision of actions selected and modified spontaneously depending on the dynamics of the development of the child's individual traits. Thus, nurture – says Harris – “is not something a parent does to a child: it is something the parent and the child do together” (Harris, 1998, p. 44). In this context, the role of nurture is double reduced: on the genetic grounds – as intentional strive to develop the traits classified as indirect genetic effects; on the social grounds – as mutually agreed effect of dynamic interactions between equal subjects: parents and the child. Thus, rearing is not a one-way process in which the child's personality is modeled according to their parents' vision; it is a transaction where both parents and the child play equally important roles and the course and effects of which are, to a large extent, unpredictable. Given the above, parenting styles should not be associated with the established ways of parent's conduct but rather referred to the dynamics of the two-subject nature of the specific parent-child relationship (Harris, 1998, 2006). J. Harris believes that the transactional character of nurture cancels both, understanding of rearing as shaping the child's personal traits according to the pattern adopted by the parents and understanding the human nature according to the anti-nativist view of humans as “tabula rasa” or “noble savage” (Pinker, 2005, p. 317-319).

The role of nurture is reduced to the context of family home which – according to Harris – does not correspond with the social contexts of peer groups that dominate in the child's awareness (Harris, 1998, 2000). Given

the growing independence of the child in their adolescence, understood as developing a separate and independent life context, the effects of parents on the adult personality of the child disappear. After all, Harris points out, when an adult child leaves their family home, the personality they had acquired there may be lost forever (Harris, 1995, 1998).

In the paradigm adopted by J. Harris of understanding of socialization input, there is no place for the dynamics of indirect and direct influence of parents on their child. This dynamics is based on the mechanism of tension between the two forces identified with endogenous peer group formation and endogenous parenting behavior (Agostinelli et al., 2020). The direct influence of parents is visible as liberal and authoritative parenting style. Liberal style is used in peer environments safe (in parents' view) for the child, functioning in wealthier neighborhoods with relatively uniform socio-economic status. In turn, in poorer neighborhoods where socio-economic differences are greater, the dominating parenting style is authoritative. While in the first case, parent leave a room for their children to enter peer relationships, in the second case, they interfere in their child's choices of which peer group to join. The indirect character of the parental influence is expressed in their children's preferences, who identify and befriend with peer from families of similar socio-economic status and ethnic origin. The fluent nature of the ethnic-racial socialization of both environments is an evidence for the complex family and peer influences. According to the transactional model of socialization, it can be concluded that family and peer influence is complementary. In the first case, this influence is intended to protect and prepare the child to deal with discrimination in social life. In the other case, it is to promote peer ethnic-racial identity (Wang, 2023).

Polemics with thesis that group socialization theory is an alternative to nurture

According to J. Harris, her theory is unique because it identifies socialization with the intra-generational transmission of norms, patterns and roles (what enables an individual participate in social life), and with having lasting effect on personality development. However, save for emphasizing the role of intra-generational effects, the theory does not bring about a new cognitive value that would change our understanding of socialization. Socialization has been long viewed as a process of development of human personality, resulting in humans becoming individuals with their genetically determined biology and psyche, and with their own social personalities (Szczepański, 1965). Based on the dynamics of social interactions, this process develops and

constantly updates their individual capacities to act successfully in different social contexts (Hurrelmann, 1994; Turner, 1998).

Comparing the effectiveness of family nurture and peer group socialization suggests that J. Harris treats them as effects of equal scope but taking place in distinct environments. She differentiates them based on age structure criterion – family being a group of two or more generations and peer group consisting of members of similar age. Despite J. Harris' claims, this criterion is not sufficient to state that a child identifies only with peers as significant *others* who are considered, by default, as a normative reference frame that extends on all domains of the child's behavior. Nor is it sufficient to say that the child does not identify with their parents as representatives of the older generation and treats them and others in the family as a comparative frame of reference. The claim that peers have the exclusivity in this regard is not that obvious and does not recognize the complexity of reference mechanisms (Merton, 2002). Parents can be a normative reference for a child who feels their engaged participation and a strong emotional relationship. An element that strengthens the role of the family is the sense of stability and safety in the child-parents relationship when the child does not need to seek their recognition and acceptance – the values that are sought after among peers (Kowalski, 1974). It is a paradox that something that seems to be an advantage of the family is interpreted as a weakness in J. Harris' theory. Loyalty towards peers can be a sign of the child's confidence that he or she can count on the parents' understanding and indulgence also towards non-standard behaviors during adolescence. On the other hand, that what constitutes the strength of the peer group according to Harris, can be its serious weakness in situations of actual insufficient parental support revealed as the absence of monitoring and moderating the child's behaviors.

In this context, the discourse of J. Harris, who "systemically" depreciates family nurture and overrates peer socialization, is inconsistent and superficial.

First, the one-sided interpretation of the laws of behavioral genetics raises some doubts. J. Harris marginalizes the influence of family as a shared environment and emphasizes the role of peer groups in the development of personality. It has been noticed by E. E. Turkheimer: "So perhaps the appropriate conclusion is not so much that the family environment does not matter for development, but rather that the part of the family environment that is shared by siblings does not matter. What does matter is the individual environments of children, their peers, and the aspects of their parenting that they do not share" (Turkheimer, 2000, p. 162).

Second, if we assume that nurture and socialization are the same things and the only element that changes is the environment, the dispute about the role of nurture and socialization becomes pointless. It is reduced to the comparison III. (family and peer group). But this is where the problem of logics of Harris' main conclusion emerges. The use of criterion of environmental effect would be wrong and the criterion of the type of environment as the effecting agent should be used instead. Differentiation of the effect on the child's personality development due to age structure of the group focuses not on the effect but rather on the agent. The term "nurture myth" would then refer to the "family myth" identified with the environment which – according to J. Harris – does not influence the child's personality and the "peer myth" identified with environment which has a very special role in this regard. But such a conclusion is not consistent with theses adopted by J. Harris.

Third, J. Harris' theory ignores the whole complexity of child-rearing, including its axiological grounds, and therefore, it does not lead to conclusions connected with the semantics of family nurture. Her only points of reference to nurture are practical situations showing parents' efforts to model the child's personality, which I interpret – perhaps wrongly – in the context of a narrow definition of nurture (Pomykało, 1997; Nowak, 2008), the subjective character of nurture relationship (Ostrowska, 2006) and support in cultural assimilation (Callo, 2006).

Conclusions – In search for meaning of nurture in the light of paradigm formed as synthesis of biological and spiritual evolution

The theory of group socialization may be disappointing with its limited contribution to new and more thorough understanding of nurture and socialization. However, it pointed out to the role of heredity in environmental influence. The efforts of J. Harris may have some practical implications in family nurture, especially in adoptive families. Adoptive parenting is based on affirmative approach to genetical distinctness of parents and the child. It involves acceptance of self as adoptive parent or adopted child and stimulation of inner will to develop deep feelings for one another (Wąsiński, 2018). Genetical strangeness is an authentic challenge for both parties. It involves crossing the barriers between the two separate, and sometimes biogenically completely different personalities. Their common experience is the growing awareness of decouplability of the evolved adaptive mechanisms and axiological and moral sensitivity. In extreme cases, it is visible in the lack of basic similarity in the way they see, feel and understand the world. Nurture and socialization in the family become an opportunity to create moral and

spiritual connection which will bind the worlds of the parent and the child in the community of coexistence and closeness.

The analysis of J. Harris' theory leads to a conclusion that viewing the nurture theory in the perspective of evolutionary psychology narrows down the theoretical framework for recognizing the reality of nurture and deprives it of that what seems to be the most important. The world interpreted through the evolution theory cannot contain in itself any deeper and more complex explanations of the reality (Dawkins, 2000; Pinker, 2005). However, if looked upon from another perspective – to which we are encouraged by no other than R. Dawkins – the key issue changes. Humans are presented as those who are capable of acts that are beyond their nature e.g. selfless altruism and love in its deepest meaning (Dawkins, 2007, p. 252).

Adaptation of such perspective has a profound existential consequences to understanding of the world's and human nature (McGrath, 2008). It includes the possibility of existence of the reality beyond our physical world, as an element that completes the logic understanding thereof (Meissner, 2023). This perspective assumes that humans not only are in the world but also participate in it as they want to understand it and make it part of their own microworlds. In some sense, the world is in them (Heller, 1995).

If not considered in the context of spiritual evolution, the biological evolution does not provide complete and sufficient explanations of the fullness of human nature (Heller, 1995). A desire to understand it calls for reflection over the complex human nature which is partly explained by the laws of anthropology and dimensional ontology; the laws that give us some picture of diversity and contradictions between the layers of human existence: somatic, psychic and noetic (Frankl, 2010; Nawroczyński 1947).

The synthesis of biological and spiritual evolution reveals a multi-aspect role of targeting rearing interactions at stimulation of thinking about values. Thinking which empowers – against the paradigm of the evolutionary psychology – to causative and responsible realization of one's own human nature in both the sphere of being in the world (mentioned above) and creative participation in it. Our world – said J. Tischner – “is without a doubt a world of some values” (2000, p. 479). “Value reading” is rooted in human freedom towards values, it develops the awareness of freedom in adopting them, giving them a subjective priority and hierarchy, following them in everyday life. Because only with this sense of inner freedom, one is capable of discovering values and with them, the meaning of life (Frankl, 2010; Popielski, 2007).

In a value-oriented nurture one can speak about the sense of rearing in which “some <<what for>>, or a goal, is expressed, something precious, its significance included in one of the anthropological-ethical categories” (Śliwerski, 2007, p. 35). In this context, nurture means the multiple stage process of transition from even more mature thinking about values (important from the point of view of the integral human development) to affirmative thinking according to these values. It involves mutually inspired learning how to “read the world of values”, which leads to a fuller understanding of the world, its rules, norms and patterns and, first of all, the self in relation to this world and one’s own place and creative participation in it. Thus, that what is presented in Harris’ evolutionary psychology as weakness of nurture, ceases to be its weakness if human free will is involved.

Therefore the question: “Genes or nurture?” seems to be misformulated. Genotype is not a competition to nurture but rather a challenge during conscious developing the full potential of individual personality hidden in it. It is also a challenge for stimulating sensitivity to autotelic values including altruism and love and willingness to live them out in an ongoing strive to discover and give meaning to one’s own life.

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