

## IN MEMORIAM

### Judith Rich Harris (1938–2019)



Photo by Nomi L. Harris

“We are in considerable doubt that you will develop into our professional stereotype of what an experimental psychologist should be.” When the Harvard psychology department kicked Judith Rich Harris out of their doctoral program in 1960, they could not have known how true the words in their expulsion letter would turn out to be.

Judith Rich was born in Brooklyn on February 10, 1938, the daughter of Sam and Fran Lichtman Rich. After a freshman year at the University of Arizona, she earned a bachelor’s degree in psychology at Brandeis in 1959. She earned a master’s degree from Harvard in 1961 and later that year married her fellow graduate student Charles Harris, who became a researcher in visual perception at AT&T Bell Labs. From the 1960s through the 1980s, she published experimental papers in perception and visual search, including one with S. S. Stevens, a pioneer in modern psychophysics, and another with John A. Swets, who first adapted signal detection theory to psychology. She gave birth to one daughter, Nomi Harris, and adopted another, Elaine Valk.

After leaving Harvard, Harris wrote textbooks in child psychology until she could no longer believe what she was writing. The epiphany came when she was reiterating the conventional wisdom that adolescents were attempting to attain mature adult status and she realized,

If teenagers wanted to be like adults they wouldn’t be shop-lifting nail polish from drugstores or hanging off overpasses to spray I LOVE YOU LIZA on the arch. If they really aspired to “mature status” they would be doing boring adult things like sorting the laundry and figuring out their income taxes. Teenagers aren’t trying to be like adults: they are trying to *distinguish* themselves from adults!

Harris expanded this insight into a radical new theory of socialization—that children’s personalities are shaped by genes and peers, not parents—which she laid out in a 1995 article in *Psychological Review* (“Where Is the Child’s Environment? A Group Socialization Theory of Development”) and her 1998 bestseller, *The Nurture Assumption: Why Children Turn Out the Way They Do*.

Her case began with a finding that was common knowledge among behavioral geneticists but unknown to most psychologists or to the public: that the similarities between parents and their biological children can be explained by their shared genes. That is, siblings reared apart grow up no more different than siblings reared together, and adopted siblings are not similar to each other at all. It was bolstered by findings on the minimal effects of substantial differences in upbringing, such as being first-born or later-born, going to day care or having a stay-at-home mom, and having heterosexual or homosexual parents. It got a third shot of support from the immigrant experience: children of immigrants melt into their peer groups and grow up culturally indistinguishable from their native-born agetates.

In the past 20 years, these findings have held up well (see, in particular, Robert Plomin’s, 2015 review in *Perspectives in Psychological Science*, “The Top Ten Replicated Findings From Behavioral Genetics”). This was a fitting vindication, because Harris, more than a decade before the “replicability crisis” rocked social psychology, had presciently called attention to the small sample sizes, questionable research practices, and lack of robustness of some of the most famous studies on the effects of parenting. She contrasted them unfavorably with major findings in behavioral genetics, which had been demonstrated in massive studies in multiple countries over many decades.

Harris’s theory received wide recognition. Her article won the George Miller Prize from Division 1 of the American Psychological Association, proof, she wrote, that the gods have a sense of humor: The letter kicking her out of graduate school had been signed by the acting chair of the

department at the time, none other than George Miller. Her book was featured in a *New Yorker* profile by Malcolm Gladwell, a review in the *New York Times* by Carol Tavris, and a cover of *Newsweek* featuring the headline “Do Parents Matter?” She elaborated on her ideas and on the (sometimes furious) controversies raised by the book in more than 30 articles in newspapers, books, Web forums, and professional journals, and in her 2006 follow-up book, *No Two Alike: Human Nature and Human Individuality*.

In that book, Harris not only took on her critics but elaborated on her own theory of socialization. She acknowledged limitations in her original hypothesis that children were socialized by their peers. Though enculturation (including accent, cultural values, and tastes in music and fashion) could be attributed to peer influence, this could not explain variance in personality. The reason is that peer culture is shared among siblings, so it cannot explain the substantial variation in personality attributable neither to genes nor to the shared family environment. Though children do sort themselves into different peer groups—the jocks, the brains, the goths, the hippies, the glamor girls—she noted that this sorting is itself based on heritable traits, so the variation would turn up as indirect effects of heritability, not effects of the “unique” or “nonshared” environment, which is the mystery in need of explanation.

Harris hypothesized that idiosyncratic experiences throughout childhood—a triumph or embarrassment in athletic or social competition, a conspicuous accident or incident—could saddle children with a reputation, or fit them into a niche, to which they then increasingly adapted their personality. Since this contingent specialization was uncorrelated with genes or with the shared environment, it satisfied the logical requirements of explaining effects of non-shared environment on personality. Harris was particularly proud of this hypothesis, and frustrated that it was overshadowed by simplistic takeaways like “It’s all in the genes” or “Parents don’t matter.”

Several social scientists have cited Harris as a profound influence on their thinking. They include the author of this obituary, who featured her ideas prominently in his 2002 book, *The Blank Slate*; Brian Boutwell, associate professor of legal studies at the University of Mississippi; and Kevin Beaver, the Judith Rich Harris Professor of Criminology at Florida State University.

Proposing a heterodox theory of socialization was not the only way in which Harris defied the stereotype of an ex-

perimental psychologist. Stricken with an autoimmune disorder, she was a physical shut-in but a prolific correspondent. Her lack of conventional credentials led the press to note that the field of developmental psychology had been upended by “a grandmother from New Jersey.” She was an insightful and unsentimental observer of human behavior, an irreverent challenger of alpha males, and the wielder of a Dorothy-Parker-esque wit. In *The Nurture Assumption*, she reproduced the famous poem by Philip Larkin:

They fuck you up, your mum and dad.

They may not mean to, but they do.

They fill you with the faults they had

And add some extra, just for you.

And commented,

Poor old Mum and Dad: publicly accused by their son, the poet, and never given a chance to reply to his charges. They shall have one now, if I may take the liberty of speaking for them:

How sharper than a serpent’s tooth

To hear your child make such a fuss.

It isn’t fair—it’s not the truth—

He’s fucked up, yes, but not by us.

Harris repeatedly had to deal with the misunderstanding, “So you’re saying it doesn’t matter how I treat my children?” She reminded her readers that parenting is a moral responsibility: “We may not hold their tomorrows in our hands but we surely hold their todays, and we have the power to make their todays very miserable.” It is also a human relationship: “If you don’t think the moral imperative is a good enough reason to be nice to your kid, try this one: Be nice to your kid when he’s young so that he will be nice to you when you’re old.” And she ended her book with a reply to the charge that she was absolving parents of responsibility for their children’s lives by reminding them of the responsibility they have for their *own* lives: “As for what’s wrong with you: Don’t blame it on your parents.”

 Steven Pinker  
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