
Socialization and the Domains of Peer Influence

Attachment security with parents (or caregivers) is absolutely crucial in fostering child development. To validate this claim, intense concentration in research has been spent examining the various connections between child development and parental impact. Yet, are parental attachments the most important influence in a child's socialization? Is this the principal foundation by which personality characteristics are forged? If parents model behavior, do children simply follow suit? According to Judith Rich Harris, "Young children do imitate their parents in all societies, but they imitate many other people as well: older siblings, nonfamily adults and children, and characters they see on television" (462). Thus, as Harris' statement suggests, the impact on personality development is far more complex than a combination of genetics and attachment security. In fact, even as babies' attachment to their parents are indicative of future peer interactions (Shonkoff & Philips, 169), such development is also shaped by many others through domain specific interactions.

Two important domains in any child's life are the units of family and school (i.e. one's immediate classmates). These groups, as is true with any function of collectivity, find their legitimacy in the peculiar coupling of both a group mentality phenomena ("us" versus "them") and individualism. For example, in a study involving chimpanzees, it was observed that once the primates were put into two separate groups, increased levels of animosity toward each other ensued. The aggression escalated to the point where one group destroyed the other (Harris, 464). This illustrates the joint identity that occurs upon the impression of a perceived rivalry that the formation of the group itself may imply. An additional study that reinforces this point involves the Robbers Cave summer camp group of 11-year-old boys that were put into two groups: the "Rattlers" and the "Eagles." Before the Rattlers and the Eagles had even come into contact, it was evident to researchers that aggression for the other team had already developed (Harris, 463). It is clear that once individuals categorize themselves in a particular way, a group mentality is formed. Making the communal bond even stronger is when such connections are based on actual similarity, creating a sense of belonging and instigating a deeper impression of "others" as an oppositional entity (Roseth, 2). On the other hand, most people do not describe their relationships with others (i.e. in group situations) as requiring identical interest and/or behavior (Hartup & Stevens, 356). Within a similar cohesive group example, one can also witness individualism arise, despite assumptions the formation of a group implies the impairment of personal preferences (Mosier & Rogoff, 1047). If, within a familial unit, a child denotes an interest in a particular activity, the child's sibling(s) may intentionally choose not to pursue the same hobby in order to keep others from thinking s/he is "copying" the other.

These identities--both collective and individual--are not dichotomous, but actually function together within each of a number of specific domains to generate the personality characteristics of the child. Socialization, or the "process by which an infant becomes an acceptable member of his or her society" (Harris, 461), is highly context specific. In both contexts of family and academic class, there are rules of conduct and norms that are enforced--albeit in different ways--to maintain the overall solidarity of the group and to produce the desired characteristics in participants. Such domain specificity in regard to understanding the development of a child's personality characteristics is necessary since what is learned by a child as appropriate in the family unit is not always appropriate as a classmate. Situational awareness is apparently natural, as is evident by a study with babies learning to kick. The babies discovered that by hitting a mobile with their feet, it would move; but once the surroundings changed slightly (i.e. the color of playpen drapery), the babies suddenly did not kick the mobile but acted as though all elements of the situation had changed. However, when the everything was back to its original state, the babies began kicking again. Thus, it is clear that upon birth, babies possess the fundamental knowledge that "What you learn in one context will not necessarily work in another" (Harris, 462).

One of the most important domains in which a child will be socialized is the familial unit--and consequently, the first group which the child will likely belong. As stated previously, the impact of the parent-child relationship has been well researched, but at what level do siblings--who function as the child's first peers--influence development? As Harris points out, "Many kinds of learning do not require the presence of a model, and for those that do, every society provides some kind of a model. In most traditional societies, the models are older children, especially siblings" (474). Modeling may directly inspire a certain amount of matching behavior, but it may also cause the child to react distinctively. In fact, even home environments rearing identical twins will seldom demonstrate true characteristic similarity above 50% of the time (Harris, 459). Therefore, it is apparent that each child within the familial unit actually maintains his/her own place within the collective group. Ultimately, siblings do not only directly influence the behavioral and cognitive developments of other siblings, their relationships within the familial group as a whole carries an indirect effect. For example, how an infant looks, the temperament, and compatibility with affiliates will change the way others react to the baby; this includes, perhaps surprisingly, a mother's affection. As reported by the Dunn and Plomin study, two thirds of both American (80%) and British (86%) mothers admitted to being partial to one child over another (Harris, 461). In a family, where the child's peers are his/her siblings, the treatment of each child will play a role in self-perceptions of inherent value within the unit. This will affect the child's compatibility with others, which in turn will inhibit the socialization of the child in other play groups. As Shonkoff and Philips suggest, "Angry children who feel unloved and unlovable, not surprisingly, make poor playmates, as do whiny and easily frustrated children" (170). When one sibling is treated differently from another-- specifically in the form of preferential treatment--it can be detrimental to that child's sense of self (Harris, 461).

As children age, their frequency of interaction with other children outside the home expands; by age 2 toddlers are interacting with other children at a rate of 10%, at 4 years of age it increases to 20%, and from ages 7 to 11 children are involved with others 40% of the time (Roseth, 2). As a result, with the increased frequency of interaction with other children comes an increase in the strength of their

influence on socialization. The impact of such interaction with other youths can easily be witnessed within the realms of academia. It is not coincidence that children's levels of activity with other children (outside of the familial unit) increases with school age. Children attending schools typically do so for at least 7 hours, and within that time are socializing with others of possibly different ages and/or gender. This further strengthens the effectiveness of their impact on each other's social development. Similar to the family group where siblings serve as a model, school-aged peers are also models for the norms that will be accepted. According to Hartup and Stevens, "One guesses that, from early childhood through old age, individuals model normative behavior for their friends and simultaneously receive reinforcement from them" (363). One of the most profound ways of observing direct peer influence is in regards to linguistics. When children do not share a common language with which to communicate, it becomes necessary for one to be created. Such a phenomena was witnessed during the late 1800s when immigrant parents from numerous countries came to Hawaii to work on sugar plantations; their children were unable to converse with each other. Of their own accord, the children began using a highly simplistic language that developed into a creole. What is so astonishing is that the creole, a complete language, was created by the children, not their parents (Harris, 469). Another example of direct peer influence is the Nyansongo children from Africa that developed their own language in order to freely discuss the private parts of the human body around adults, a topic that would be forbidden otherwise. The information is passed from older to younger children (Harris, 470).

Peer interactions among school-age children also contribute to the socialization of the child in indirect ways. According to Shonkoff and Philips, the ease with which children are able to make and maintain friendships creates a "...context in which they evaluate their self-worth, competence, and view of the world as pleasant or hostile" (163). In fact, the sociability of the child, and the reactions of others to the child during initial interactions, can set the stage for future socialization. But, Schonkoff and Philips go on to admit that, "Peer status is not written in stone, even when assessments are focused on a child's standing in the same group over time" (164). The authors explain that this is because children included in the study altered their "liking" or "disliking" of another child within a short period of time (within the span of weeks). It is likely, then, that rejection by peers--or perceived rejection--can also have an impact on a socially developing child's confidence in future interactions. The reverse may also be the case, where a child who feels accepted by others will in turn perceive his/her actions as the norm, and will be encouraged accordingly.

The socialization of children is both directly and indirectly affected by peers, depending on the specific domain of the interaction. It an essential part of the learning experience for each child to consider the context of normative behavior, and be able to balance what is learned in each of those situations. The ease with which youth make and maintain friendships, effectively communicate within context, and preserve both individual and collective identities will serve them as they move into adulthood--where new set of socialized norms progresses.