An Introduction to Sociology

Are human characteristics fixed, or are they shaped by factors in a person's social environment? In other words, is it something that is set at conception as the product of breeding (nature), or is it something more complex linked to the overall function of the environment (nurture), or is it a mixture of the two? The controversies surrounding the nature versus nurture debate are long standing and have produced many varied studies.

According to Charles Darwin (1859), evolution is the process by which the human species has developed from other species by means of adaptation through natural selection. Darwin proposed this theory in his book "On the Origin of the Species". His theory of evolution consists of variation, inheritance, competition, natural selection and finally adaptation. Darwin believed that individuals within a species differ from one another; some of this variation is inherited from their parents. Competition between individuals is inevitable as they must compete for the limited recourses of food or mates. This is followed by natural selection, competition leads to individuals within the species with the best characteristics producing the most offspring, the individuals who are best adapted to their ecological role will be the fittest as they are more likely to survive and therefore reproduce. Environmental change means that the new characteristics that have developed are continually being selected, promoting evolution and survival of the fittest.

According to the psychologists who lean towards the nature idea of intelligence, we are born with certain capacities to observe our environment in certain ways. These capacities are incomplete or immature when first born and develop gradually throughout childhood. These particular psychologists believe learning plays only a minor role in the development of an individual's intellect.

The empiricists (nurture), on the other hand, maintain that we are born as blank slates and that our knowledge and abilities are acquired through a process of differing experiences and are therefore learned.

The issue of the role of heredity or environment in shaping our eventual intelligence began to appear as long ago as the seventeenth century when a philosopher named John Locke (1632-1704) produced data on the subject of empiricism (nurture). He argued the newborn mind to be like a blank slate, tabula rasa on which development is directed by experience and education in the form of human learning that can be written from scratch, thus forming the nurture argument.

This view differed from that of many philosophers of the time and also from the developing group of new psychologists. One such person who had very different ideas towards intelligence was Francis Galton, the first cousin of famed scientist Charles Darwin who was a devoted eugenicist having invented the term in 1883. Galton also constructed the world's first intelligence test.

In his book Hereditary Genius (1884) he argued that from his studies of distinguished Victorians intelligence clearly ran in the family and was therefore inherited. He went

even further with his studies into inherited intelligence and behaviour and observed that the 'lower classes' were breeding at an alarming rate and to prevent the resulting lowering of intelligence these people should be prevented from breeding to keep the society racially 'pure' and prevent it from becoming 'mongrelised'.

Galton (1822-1911) proposed that by breeding genetically 'good' humans, we could achieve a perfect race within human society. The term itself literally means 'good breeding' while the main objective of eugenics is to encourage the ablest and healthiest people to have more children and to discourage the 'unfit' from reproducing. Many falsely think that because of a genetic defect or an unequal stance within society, some people are not worthy of living life to its full potential like the 'norms' of society.

The idea of eugenics alone is faulty and contrary to human existence. It not only contradicts the morals of humanity, but it stands against the teachings of the Catholic Church. The whole science behind eugenics is to improve on the human race by shutting out some and accepting others and this is detrimental to humanity and therefore to society.

The Bell Curve (1994) is a very controversial book written by Charles Murray. The book explores the role of intelligence in American life. It became widely read and debated due to its discussion of race and intelligence. It states that human intelligence is determined by the genes. Murray argues that intelligence is based upon breeding and that the world is dividing itself into an intelligent and a less-intelligent population. Their racist hypothesis devalued the role of environment and concluded that "we" are victims of genetic fate. The book was both supported and criticises by large numbers of people, many criticised its authors of supporting scientific racism.

Devlin et al has challenged Murray conclusions. Their studies revealed that intelligence was only about 34% based on genes (nature), with a huge 66% based upon environmental factors (nurture). Devlin's findings are highly relevant since they emphasise the significance of the prenatal environment as one of the primary factors influencing intelligence.

Philip Vernon carried out research studies into contributions of environmental and genetic factors into intellectual development in the 1940s and 1950s. He believed that Western IQ tests were unsuitable for non-Western people; he also applied the same argument to the use of Western IQ testes within different subcultures and social classes within Western Societies. He stated that "There is no such thing as culture-fair tests, and never can be" (Haralambos p.747). Vernon developed a hierarchical model of IQ testing in the 1950s, which broke down the test into many subcategories. He concluded that social class differences have some genetic basis. He based this conclusion on evidence that intelligence of adopted children relate more to the social class of their biological parents than to their adopted parents. Vernon believed that social mobility allowed individuals with high IQ levels to rise to the socially high classes' whilst those with low IQ levels would fall to socially lower classes.

Cultural rules play a profound role in our society today, and through education we have learnt what is right and what is wrong. However, could somebody who has not been brought up knowing these rules be able to interact with other humans? There are many cases where children in particular have had no social interact with other humans in the early stages of life, where primary socialisation should take place. And the outcome has been that they have no facial expression, incorrect movement, and have no human speech. The most popular example of this is the feral children.

Feral Children are children who have been nurtured in the wild by animals, children that were raised in a non-human, inhuman or sub-human environment and because of it did not learn how to communicate or behave in a human manner. Two particular cases of child deprivation that argue the case of nurture particularly well are Amala and Kamala and Genie.

Amala and Kamala were two sisters aged approximately eight and one and a half who were brought up by wolves in the 1920 in Bengal, India. When captured they were taken to an orphanage where they were looked after by the reverend Singh and his wife.

Singh described them as "wolf like" in appearance and behaviour. They walked on all fours and had calluses on their knees and palms from doing so. They preferred to eat raw meat and stole it when ever they could. They licked water with their tongues and ate their food in a crouched position. Their tongues permanently hung out of their mouths, and they panted just like wolves. They never slept after midnight and howled at night. They could move very fast on all four's. They turned away from human society altogether. If approached, they made faces and sometimes bared their teeth. Their hearing was very acute and they could smell meat at a great distance. They could also orientate themselves very well at night. In September 1921 both girls became ill, and Amala, the younger, died.

Probably the most famous case of a feral child is that of Genie. She spent nearly 13 years in almost total isolation and was fed only on milk and baby food. She was eventually found and placed in a children's hospital. At that time she could not stand straight, chew or see beyond 10 feet. She was inquisitive though and after 7 years her IQ had increased from 38 to 74 although she never developed the normal use of language. Many Psychologists believe that a child will have permanent difficulties in learning a language unless they start from an early age. Others argue that children could be mentally retarded from such abuse. So Genie's case does not resolve the nature-nurture controversy surrounding human development. In 1977, the last time Genie was filmed, scientists found that without constant teaching Genie had regressed. She now barely said a word.

In other cases of feral children, some, who were discovered at a much younger age than Genie, learnt language and were eventually able to speak reasonably well. Genie however was unable to do more than string a few words together.

Genie failed to learn any kind of grammar, and this is what distinguishes the language of humans from that of animals. Genie could not grasp the difference between various pronouns or between active and passive verbs. In that sense she appeared to have passed the critical period. The critical period is a hypothesis that states that the first few years of life are a crucial time in the development of a first language providing that a sufficient stimulus is present. If the acquisition of language is not achieved during this time then it will never be fully achieved.

Socialisation is a major sociological concept that provides the link between the individual and their Society. Socialisation is the ongoing social learning process that is necessary for human existence and development.

There are two types of socialisation, primary and secondary. Those factors that are involved in primary socialisation are usually small, involve face-to-face interaction and communication and allow the individual to express the whole self, both feelings and intellect. Usually, those factors are the family, peer groups, of close friends. Within these groups, through personal experience, the individual learns 'primary values' such as love, loyalty, justice, sharing, etc.

In contrast, secondary groups are usually large, more impersonal and formally organised, and exist for specific purposes. In the secondary stage, the individual learns more values and norms which are to be applied for the individual to fit in. This includes learning how to organise and conduct themselves in formal contexts (backgrounds) and how to behave towards people who have different degrees of status and authority. One of the crucial aspects of secondary socialisation is school.

The effects of growing up in unsocial conditions in these and other cases seem consistent. When the children emerged immediately into society, they were generally described by observers as 'primitive' and 'hardly human'. None of the children developed social and communication skills beyond a basic level, in spite of attempts to re-socialise them. Above all, their absence or limited ability to learn language prevented them from functioning fully within society. These cases, also, suggest that human development, especially those of gaining basic social and communication skills, needs considerable contact with others.

These stories do more than just confirm the important role of education, and that not just nature plays an important role in growth and development but also the environment in which you grow up in. They show that a human being not only can, but must be educated or learn to become a human being. Even when isolated from birth, animals usually retain clearly recognisable instincts. A cat that is raised among dogs, will still behave like a cat. Humans, however, enter the world very poorly equipped. The knowledge a child needs to become fully human is not complete. Everything the child eventually knows, or can do, must be learned. With the exception of natural body functions, such as breathing, as well as the reflexes, everything else must be learned.

That is why feral children are an excellent source of evidence in the nature and nurture debate, because they cannot walk, talk or even socialise. They cannot show any emotions nor have empathy. This is due to them growing up in isolation and not having humans to human interaction so that they can learn the basic skills of life. This also proves that its not only nature that play a big role in child development but the environment you grow up in makes an impact to child development or the upbringing of a person because that is where you learn to be what you will become.

To conclude, culture is a very important idea in Sociology and without it, we would have no language, we would not be able to express ourselves, and our ability to reason and think would be severely restricted. Through the process of Socialisation, children learn the way of life or culture of their society. If culture did not exist, then society would not exist and vice versa.

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