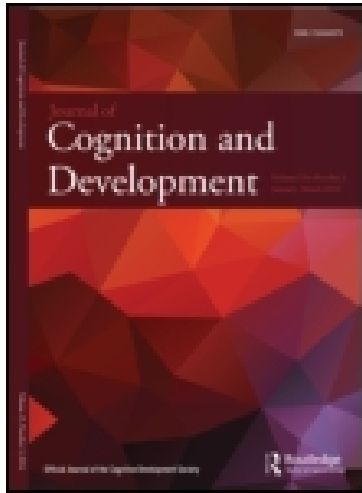


This article was downloaded by: [University of Virginia, Charlottesville]

On: 31 March 2015, At: 05:59

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



Journal of Cognition and Development

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/hjcd20>

Anthropologist in the Crib? A Review of Trusting What You're Told

Rebecca A. Dore ^a, Angeline S. Lillard ^a & Vikram K. Jaswal ^a

^a University of Virginia

Published online: 10 Jul 2014.



[Click for updates](#)

To cite this article: Rebecca A. Dore , Angeline S. Lillard & Vikram K. Jaswal (2014) Anthropologist in the Crib? A Review of Trusting What You're Told , Journal of Cognition and Development, 15:3, 520-523, DOI: [10.1080/15248372.2014.936789](https://doi.org/10.1080/15248372.2014.936789)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/15248372.2014.936789>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms &

Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

BOOK REVIEWS¹

Anthropologist in the Crib? A Review of *Trusting What You're Told*

Harris, Paul L. (2012). *Trusting What You're Told: How Children Learn from Others*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. 272 pages. ISBN: 0674065727

Reviewed by Rebecca A. Dore, Angeline S. Lillard,
and Vikram K. Jaswal
University of Virginia

Prior to the Industrial Revolution, from Plato (1970) to Pestalozzi (1801/1898), the idea that children learn best through their activities was dominant. For example, Plato (1970) suggested that children *practice* archery, rather than receive a classroom lesson on aerodynamics. However, during the Industrial Revolution, as educational institutions adopted the factory model (Callahan, 1962) and strengthened their allegiance to Behaviorist principles (Lillard, 2005), teaching came to be conducted primarily through language. Seated in rows of hard wooden benches, children were told what they should know (Lascarides & Hinitz, 2000). For children under age 7, there were always contrary voices: Froebel (1887) had a set of “Gifts” or materials designed to convey specific information through hands-on exploration; Montessori (1912/1965) created an extensive set of materials on this same principle, and extended this way of learning through to adolescence. Piaget (1970), impressed by Montessori’s privileging of action, incorporated in his very influential theory the view that children learn best through their activities, rendering this stance foundational in Developmental Psychology.

Paul Harris’s *Trusting What You're Told: How Children Learn from Others* stands as a wake-up call to a field that has perhaps fallen too fully in the clutches of that dogma. With all due respect to the importance of learning from experience, Harris reminds us that children actually also do learn a great deal from what people tell them. This domain of inquiry, dubbed “Learning from Testimony,” was ignited by Harris and his collaborators (Harris, 2002; Koenig, Clément, & Harris, 2004) at the turn of the millennium and it has taken Developmental Psychology by storm.

¹Editor’s Note: Paul L. Harris and Geoffrey B. Saxe received the Cognitive Development Society’s Book Awards in 2013.

Harris's primary argument is that psychologists have been using the wrong metaphor for children as learners. The classic view since Piaget is of children as "little scientists" for whom hands-on experience is the only notable source of learning about the world—even in fact while still "in the crib" (Gopnik, Meltzoff, & Kuhl, 1999). Harris makes the point that there are in fact many things that children *must learn from others*, such as that the world is flat, that Christopher Columbus discovered America, and that germs make you sick.

This idea, of course, is not entirely novel. In the typical language acquisition research paradigm, adults teach children new words, showing that children obviously learn new vocabulary from people even if they might also have innate constraints on how they do so (Markman, 1989). Other research has focused on how children learn causal explanations from the testimony of adults (Callanan & Oakes, 1992). But the bulk of research in Developmental Psychology has privileged direct experience and hands-on learning. The findings Harris presents in his book demonstrate children's robust trust in testimony, and why this trust may sometimes operate in counterintuitive ways. The examples provided earlier (e.g., that germs make you sick, that Christopher Columbus discovered America) are veridical and coherent facts that children learn from other people; it makes sense that children could learn such things. But against all rationality, children also learn from others that Santa Claus travels the entire night in a flying sleigh pulled by reindeer (one of whom has a lit-up red nose) and slides down the chimney of every house to deliver a specific wished-for present to every child who (he knows) was well-behaved during the prior year! Children adopt these beliefs, in concert with their peers and with adult expectations. Harris's point is that testimony does not necessarily lead children towards the objective truth, but instead leads them towards culturally appropriate beliefs. Similarly, a child in a Christian community who learns about God's miracles has acquired beliefs that match those of his or her family and cultural group. This is not the activity of a "little scientist" uncovering empirical evidence and drawing rational conclusions. Rather, Harris argues that children act more like anthropologists, learning from the testimony of others towards an end goal of understanding and being part of a particular cultural group.

In their pioneering research in this domain, Harris and his collaborators developed a simple experimental method to investigate the variables that influence children's learning from testimony. The method involves presenting children with two speakers (live, on video, or even in a storybook) who offer conflicting testimony about some novel token (e.g., the name of a new object). Children are asked to resolve the conflict by deciding whom to believe. There are now dozens of studies using this paradigm, with the two speakers differing on dimensions like prior accuracy, confidence, age, gender, accent, and even physical attractiveness. The kind of provided information has also been manipulated, and includes names and functions of novel objects, morphology of novel verbs, and preferences for activities and toys.

Harris presents research from this paradigm and others, in seemingly disparate domains, illustrating that children garner a great deal of knowledge through testimony. The early chapters focus on research showing that even toddlers can use testimony to update their representations of absent objects, and that children ask questions to seek out testimony and are dissatisfied when their questions are not answered in a meaningful way. Next, Harris presents evidence of children using testimony to guide their behaviors: children imitate others' behavior faithfully as a way of acquiring cultural knowledge, and under certain conditions, will defer to adult testimony even when it conflicts with their direct experience. Yet children are not indiscriminate in their trust: they trust familiar people over strangers, people with a history of accuracy over people with a

history of inaccuracy, and people who are in consensus over a dissenter. This selectivity prevents them from learning incorrect or, more importantly for Harris's argument, culturally inappropriate information. In the last few chapters, Harris covers the use of testimony in several different domains. Some domains are those that one might expect: For example, children use testimony to decide whether different entities are real or not real, and whether miracles can truly occur. But children also use testimony in their reasoning about morality and death. Even the rare child who has decided to become a vegetarian in a meat-eating family for moral reasons has based this decision on testimony from others about animal suffering. Similarly with death, children must learn about mortality and posthumous experience from others, and use this testimony to inform their developing understanding of this concept.

Beyond reading this book for its important content, one should also read it as an example of superb writing, and as a demonstration of how to conduct programmatic research. Harris's prose is elegant, and he makes the logic of the research enterprise abundantly clear.

One caveat about the testimony paradigm is that, as a laboratory method, it is particularly artificial: How often are children in "real life" faced with two informants making conflicting declarations, and asked by a bystander in which declaration they believe? An important further step with this paradigm is suggested by the theory of mind literature. The "false belief" (Wimmer & Perner, 1983) paradigm is also not a natural one, but its validity is clear in that children's performance on the task is related to real-world constructs like social competence (e.g., Astington, 2003; Capage & Watson, 2001). A promising area of research in the testimony field will be investigating how performance on laboratory tasks is related to real-world constructs like critical thinking (see also Mills, 2013).

For a field that has been very focused on how children learn by doing, the research Harris gathers in this delightful volume are an excellent reminder that children also learn from what others tell them—but judiciously so. Children do not accept all testimony wholesale, but judge verbal information by its merits and use it to acquire beliefs consistent with their particular cultural group. Although hands-on learning clearly has its uses, the centrality of the metaphor of child as scientist, learning only through hands-on activity, has been due for a correction which this most readable and interesting volume provides.

REFERENCES

- Astington, J. W. (2003). Sometimes necessary, never sufficient: False-belief understanding and social competence. In B. Repacholi & V. Slaughter (Eds.), *Individual differences in theory of mind: Implications for typical and atypical development* (pp. 13–38). New York: Psychology Press.
- Callahan, R. E. (1962). *Education and the cult of efficiency*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Callanan, M. A., & Oakes, L. M. (1992). Preschoolers' questions and parents' explanations: Causal thinking in everyday activity. *Cognitive Development, 7*, 213–233.
- Capage, L., & Watson, A. C. (2001). Individual differences in theory of mind, aggressive behavior, and social skills in young children. *Early Education & Development, 12*, 613–628. doi: 10.1207/s15566935eed1204_7
- Froebel, F. (1887). *Autobiography of Froebel: Vol 2. Kindergarten*. New York: Kellogg.
- Gopnik, A., Meltzoff, A. N., & Kuhl, P. K. (1999). *The scientist in the crib: Minds, brains, and how children learn*. New York: William Morrow & Co.
- Harris, P. (2002). Checking our sources: The origins of trust in testimony. *Studies In History and Philosophy of Science Part A, 33*(2), 315–333.
- Koenig, M. A., Clément, F., & Harris, P. L. (2004). Trust in testimony: Children's use of true and false statements. *Psychological Science, 15*(10), 694–698.

- Lascarides, V. C., & Hinitz, B. F. (2000). *History of early childhood education*. New York: Falmer Press.
- Lillard, A. S. (2005). *Montessori: The science behind the genius*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Markman, E. M. (1989). *Categorization and naming in children*. Cambridge, MA: Bradford-MIT Press.
- Mills, C. M. (2013). Knowing when to doubt: Developing a critical stance when learning from others. *Developmental Psychology, 49*, 404–418.
- Montessori, M. (1912/1965). *The Montessori method*. New York: Schocken.
- Pestalozzi, J. H. (1801/1898). *How Gertrude teaches her children* (2nd ed.). Syracuse, NY: CW Bardeen.
- Piaget, J. (1970). *Science of education and the psychology of the child* (D. Coltman, trans.). New York: Orion Press.
- Plato. (1970). *The laws* (T. J. Saunders, trans.). Middlesex, England: Penguin.
- Wimmer, H., & Perner, J. (1983). Beliefs about beliefs: Representation and constraining function of wrong beliefs in young children's understanding of deception. *Cognition, 13*, 103–128. doi: 10.1016/0010-0277(83)90004-5