

1 Modernity, Parenting, and Families

My research career began with an interest in modern inequality, and especially in how different kinds of inequality intersect (in the 1990s, this concern often went under a list that now seems quaintly short: “race, class, and gender”). My first project as an intern was to examine large demographic data sets from the US Census Bureau and figure out how many unmarried couples were living together.¹ That and a few other projects eventually made me a family demographer, but my interest in inequality persisted. I started pulling families and inequality together—and increasingly saw families as one of the key pieces of the intersecting inequality puzzle. To get into that requires more than the simple observation that children inherit the wealth or poverty of their parents—although that is a good deal of the point. It requires unearthing what happens within families, the gender and age and power issues that percolate behind the closed doors of the family household. And to see the overall effect of families on inequality, we need to tackle the less obvious—and hard to track—problem of who get to have the families they want, which (as the marriage equality debate taught us) turns out to be the crux of many matters.

In this chapter I start with several essays on what we now call “parenting,” the uniquely modern practice of transforming the raw material of

humanity into interlocking—even if disordered—pieces of the social order. Nothing in this process is as obvious as it seems, from the individual yet profoundly social decision of what to name a child through the immediate imperative to keep children safe. From sudden infant death syndrome to Santa, from vaccine exemptions to screen time, parenting is a complicated performance that both reflects and builds identities in the family, and between families. Inequality is not the only product of this performance, but it's one of the most important.

1. WHY DON'T PARENTS NAME THEIR DAUGHTERS MARY ANYMORE?

For the first time in the history of the United States of America, the name Mary fell out of the top hundred names given to newborn girls in 2009, according to data from the Social Security name database. This milestone in our cultural transformation apparently went unnoticed beyond the few readers of my blog. In the raw numbers, the number of Marys born as of 2016 was down 95 percent from 1961, the last year she was at #1—a drop from 47,645 that year to just 2,487 now.

Mary was the #1 name every year in the database from 1880—when Social Security records start—to 1961 (except for a five-year stint as second to Linda in 1947–52). Naming your daughter Mary was as traditional as girls wearing blue (the color associated with the Virgin Mary). In fact, however, we now know Mary has been falling in popularity since 1850, but hardly anyone noticed. In 1961, 2.3 percent of girls were given the name Mary, but in 1850 it was 13 percent. Going back further, the signers of the US Constitution in 1787 had forty-three wives, 21 percent of whom were named Mary (another 21 percent were named Elizabeth, but that name was never again as dominant).² I also checked sixty-seven wives of Confederate and Union generals and found that 28 percent were named Mary. Among regular people, a study of naming in the town of Hingham, Massachusetts, found that 12 percent of girls were named Mary around 1800 (Sarah was almost as popular before 1800).³

Now, thanks to a law that allows old federal records to become public after seventy-two years, and the diligent efforts of the IPUMS (Integrated

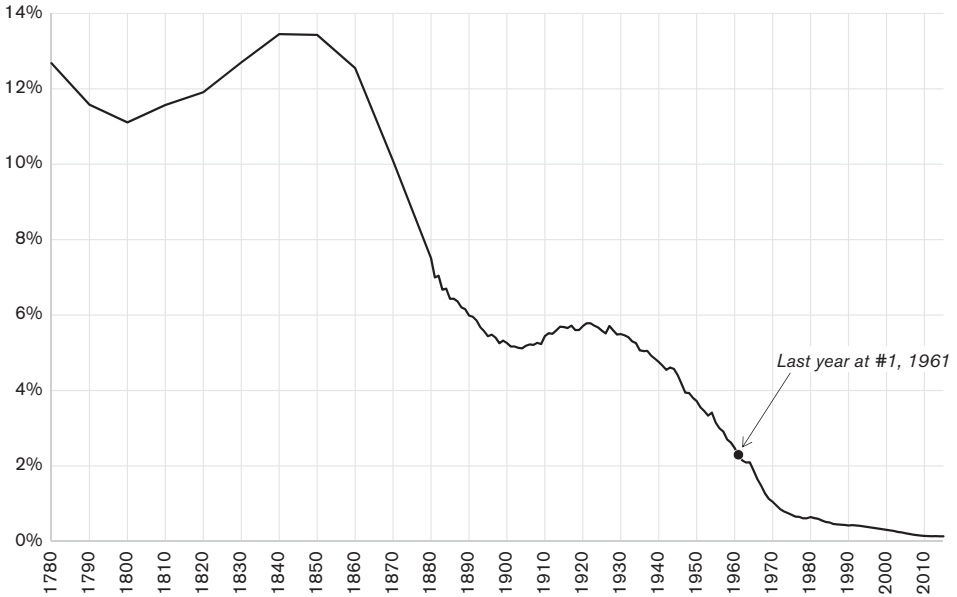


Figure 1. Percentage of girls in the United States given the name Mary, by year of birth: 1780–2015. Source: Author analysis of US Census data at IPUMS.org and Social Security Administration data at www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/. From 1780 to 1880 the data are limited to those born in the United States.

Public Use Microdata Series) database at the University of Minnesota, we can analyze the names of individuals in the United States going back to 1850—and since some women in the 1850 Census were quite old I can look back as far as about 1780 to see what proportion of them were named Mary back then (figure 1).⁴ Here is the resulting trend for Mary, expressed as a percentage of all girls born in the United States. By the time Mary fell from the #1 spot her dominance had already long since faded.

Naming patterns demonstrate how that which is most personal is profoundly shaped by social trends larger than ourselves. That's why, even with about two million girls born each year in the United States, the number named Mary is always within a few hundred of the previous year—and why the line in figure 1 is so smooth. In the tradition of treating statistical trends as horse races, I imagine that there is one person named

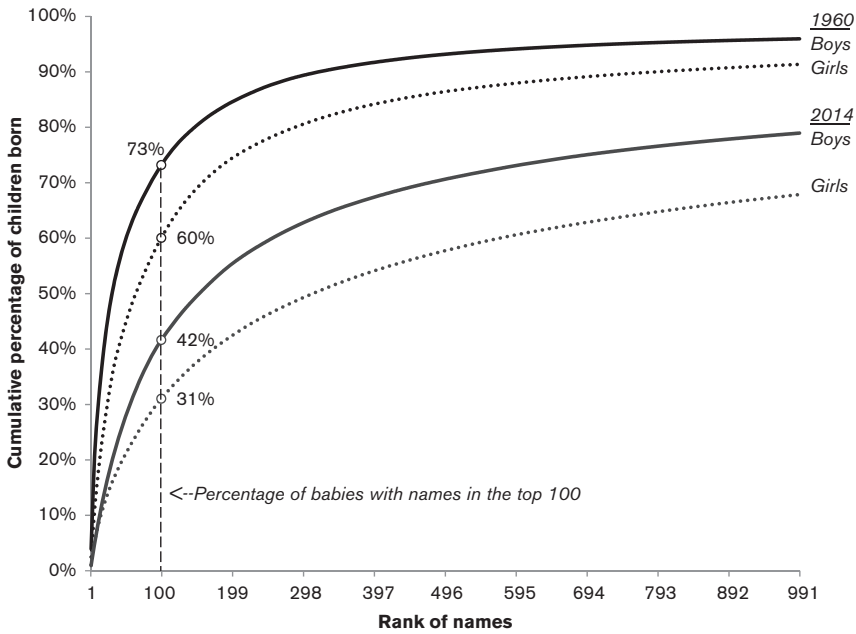


Figure 2. Percentage of children born, by frequency rank of names: 1960 and 2014, by gender. Source: Author analysis of Social Security Administration data at www.ssa.gov/oact/babynames/.

Mary, who is constantly falling behind: first behind Linda, then Lisa, Jennifer, Ashley, Jessica, and so on, all the way to Isabella and Sophia and Emma. That's what it looks like, but that's not how it happens—it's just an illusion created by the amazing regularity in human behavior, which produces an orderly succession of names. Somehow, the millions of individual decisions that parents make produce steady trends like this.⁵

The trend is powerful, but how it works is opaque. Something in “the culture” is applying pressure to millions of families in such a way that the already tiny proportion deciding to use Mary becomes smaller almost every year. The fact is: few people nowadays want to name girls Mary. Why?

It's not the fall of religion. Consider that, in 2014, there were 1.6 times as many girls named Nevaeh—*heaven* spelled backward. The rise (and,

already, beginning of a fall) of Nevaeh, which only appeared on the list in 2001, is a tipoff to what's going on. It's the long-term increase in naming diversity. Compare 1960 with 2014 (figure 2). The top hundred girls' names were given to 60 percent of girls in 1960, but they now represent just half that: 31 percent. Emma, the #1 name in 2014, was given to just 1.1 percent of girls.

So how do we understand this transformation? It's not immigration or ethnic diversity, although these may play some role in recent decades. (Maria showed potential, rising as high as thirty-first place in the early 1970s, but now she's crashed as well, down to #115.) In fact, in the old days Mary was common among Blacks as well as Whites, and my own analysis of the census data shows that Mary was very common among the children of immigrants from Germany and eastern Europe as well as Ireland and the United Kingdom.

As I try to fit these facts to my broader analysis of family trends, I think the collapse of Mary is mostly about the emergence of a modern view of children. The modernization theory of name trends was advanced most famously by Stanley Lieberson in his book *A Matter of Taste*. He saw the rise of individualism in modern naming practices. "As the role of the extended family, religious rules, and other institutional pressures declines," he wrote, "choices are increasingly free to be matters of taste."⁶ Mary—both a traditional American name and a symbol of religious Christianity—embodies this trend.

In the old days no one ever asked if the name Mary had "jumped the shark," because children's names weren't the subject of fashion. Now parents interested in the happening names consult the Social Security list, along with many others available all over, to help find just the right name. (Personally, I recommend a name that is not that popular—somewhere between 100 and 400—but that shows increasing popularity. That way your kid will be one of the older ones in a growing group of kids with the same name that look up to her—and you will look like a trendsetter.)

Two centuries ago, the vast majority of European Americans were not looking for a unique name, or a name that was coming into vogue, or a name that matched a popular cultural figure—or trying to avoid a name

that had jumped the shark. They usually just named children after family members. Besides the sad fact that many children died at young ages—and that there were too many children to keep track of (the average White woman had seven children in 1800)—it just didn't seem to occur to people that children were priceless individuals. And naming wasn't a way to make a statement about character and identity.

By the twentieth century Americans had started to fixate on the uniqueness of each child (and they only had about two per family). Not only was difference valued, but individuality emerged as a project—starting with naming—of creating an identity. That doesn't mean everyone wants a unique name (though, unlike in the past, some people do try for that). It means that naming is a statement of the kind of person kids are to become. So people are influenced by a TV show or a hit song and names shoot upward as fads, or crash downward when an image crisis occurs. Minor name crazes are apparent in the data after the popularity of hit songs such as “Maggie” (Rod Stewart, 1971), “Brandy” (Looking Glass, 1972), and even “Rhiannon” (Fleetwood Mac, 1975). On the other hand, the movie *Forrest Gump* killed the name Forrest in 1994, the public coming out of Ellen DeGeneres as gay seems to have tanked Ellen in 1997, and the scandal named after Monica Lewinsky marked the beginning of the end of Monica in 1998.

After all this time, amazingly, it's quite possible Mary will come back. In 2014 she had her second year of not falling in the rankings, which could signal the start of a turnaround (my 2012 essay for the *Atlantic* on this topic may or may not have played a role here). But she can never come back as she once was—a default traditional name. If she does, it will be as a fashion trend, as happened most dramatically with Emma. Emma was #3 in 1880 but fell almost continuously until the mid-1970s—as low as 458th—before turning around for a meteoric rise to #1 in 2008 and 2014. Unlike Bertha, who was once a top contender before disappearing, Emma is the rare name that rose from the ashes as fashionably classic.

If Mary does come back, it will raise a vexing question: Is it better to be the default traditional name—the most popular during the centuries when naming was not a status-conscious choice—or the top name in a crowded, competitive field of fiercely contested alternatives? Either way, I doubt

Mary (or any other name) will have the kind of long-lasting dominance she once did.

2. “PARENTING” THROUGH THE (ONLY VERY RECENT) AGES

I’ve been thinking about what we can learn from language trends on families.

A while ago I read a column by the *Times*’s Lisa Belkin, in which she wrote about the supposed decline of overparenting and the rise of the hip new nonchalant parenting. It’s a series of fads, she said: “After all, that is the way it is with parenting—which I bet was never used as a verb before the 20th century, when medicine reached the point where parents could assume their babies would survive.” It bugged me at the time that the *Times* couldn’t supply her with an intern—or a dictionary—to actually run down the term so that she didn’t have to speculate on when it had first appeared. More importantly, though, modern medicine is only part of the story. You would have to suspect a constellation of factors, including falling fertility, increasing educational investments, more higher education for parents/mothers, the modernization of medical and psychological expertise, the secularization of science, and who knows what else.

Anyway, I like the idea that parenting as a concept is relatively new. And she was right. According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *parenting* (“the activity of being a parent; the rearing of a child or children”) appeared in the *Washington Post* in 1918, in the phrase “the philosophy of perfect parenting.” Figure 3 shows the Google trend for the word *parenting* in books in American English from 1960 to 2008.

Consistent with the cultural shift idea—fewer, healthier children and richer, more educated parents—*parenting* emerged with reference to its discrete qualities as a modern activity. (The *OED* reports that it appeared in Britannica’s *Book of the Year* in 1959: “the supervision by parents of their children.”) The academic database JSTOR has a use of the term from 1930, but that’s in reference to biological procreation, not rearing. The first time it is used in the sense of “rearing” is in the *Social Service Review*

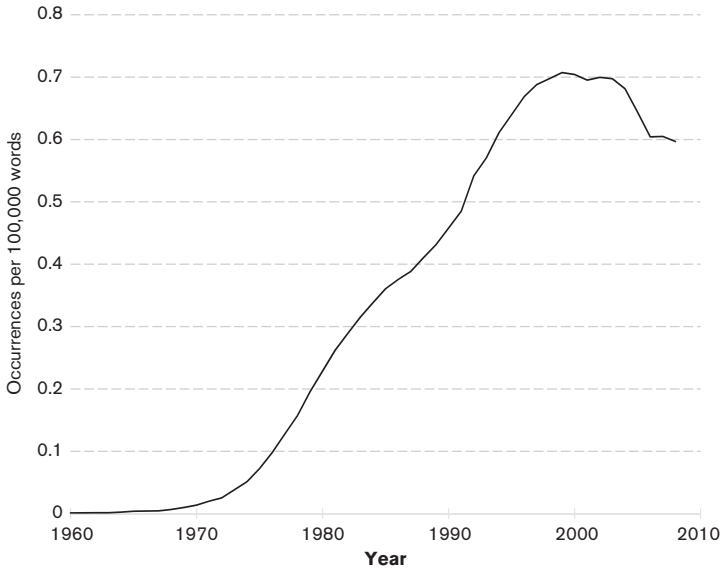


Figure 3. Uses of *parenting* in American English, 1960–2008.

Source: Author analysis of Google Ngrams database.

in 1952 in an article about foster care: “It is impossible in a changing world to expect to find a perfect or final solution to the difficult problem of sharing the parenting of children between child-care agencies and inadequate own parents.”⁷ It starts appearing routinely in the core journal *Marriage and Family Living* in 1953, as in this from 1954: “Sibling rivalry is one of the commonest evidences of poor parenting.”⁸

Wait, really? Good kids with good parents don’t have sibling rivalry? That should mean sibling rivalry has declined as a concern since parents’ education increased and standards rose after, say, the 1940s. Except, of course, sibling rivalry wasn’t discovered (or, at least, named) until the 1930s, as Google ngrams also show. The emergence of parenting has accompanied a host of attendant parenting deficits. The modern path of progress is littered with obstacles of its own creating.

As usual, the ratcheting up of standards (which may or may not be good for kids) starts among the well-off, and the more rigorous standards are

then enforced upon those at lower levels in the social order, who are left to scrape together some cheap advice from the Internet or one of the thousands of how-to parenting books.

Individuality, Dated

Modern parenting is both faddish and individualistic—conformist in its ideals, which include uniquely tailoring the experience to the individual child. In the essay on naming girls Mary, I said that two centuries ago it just didn't occur to people that children were priceless individuals. But what is the evidence for this? After reading Stanley Lieberman's work on naming in the late nineteenth century, I turned to Viviana Zelizer's *Pricing the Priceless Child*. She tracks the shift in the cultural valuing of children to that period as well. Before that time orphans were either handy little workers or burdens to be shed, and mortality rates in orphanages were astronomical; after that, they (or some of them) were expensive objects of priceless value for infertile couples. Also in the late nineteenth century there were bursts of activity in the production of parenting advice and in the professionalization of elementary education.⁹

Somewhere in that reading I came across the phrase "child's individuality," and it seemed to flag the birth of modern childhood. Ngrams concurs, showing that the term first appeared in the 1860s and then rocketed up in usage frequency in the last two decades of that century.

A read through the citations from that period shows they are concentrated in the parenting advice and education fields. Here's an example from the advice literature in 1890: "A child is liable to be looked upon as if he were simply one child among many children, a specimen representative of childhood generally; but every child stands all by himself in the world as an individual, with his own personality and character, with his own thoughts and feelings, his own hopes and fears and possibilities, his own relations to his fellow-beings and to God."¹⁰ And one from the education literature in 1886: "The child's individuality and freedom should be sacredly respected. All educational processes are to be based on a careful study, not only of child-nature in general, but also of the idiosyncrasies of the individual pupil."¹¹ This was the new, modern scientific attitude toward children, ushering in the century of "parenting."

3. HOW DO THEY DO IT?

How do families transmit inequality? This is an area where some of sociology's big ideas are being pursued, challenged, and tested through empirical studies—and where sociology is directly relevant to a pressing public issue: rising inequality.

Much of the current research on what poor versus middle-class families *do* that helps ensure their kids end up in a class position similar to their parents' focuses on "cultural capital."¹² In the theoretical language from Pierre Bourdieu, this goes back to "habitus," which is something like the internalization of social structures encountered through the life course, processed into a practical sense of acceptable action for the individual. It's that sense of entitlement, plus the skills to pull it off, that partly responds to, and partly drives, the reciprocal behavior of gatekeepers along the way to success (or its absence).

The most influential researcher on this question might be Annette Lareau, whose book *Unequal Childhoods* has become iconic.¹³ But even the richest of these studies can't yet prove that the behavior they see causes the outcome we expect. As convincing as Lareau's evidence is that rich and poor parents do it differently, the data can't tell us that's why the rich kids end up richer (or healthier or happier) in the long run. This contributes to parents' anxiety.

Nowhere is the anxiety about successful parenting more acute than it is around the skills and "choices" of mothers. What is it that more educated mothers (or parents generally) do better, if anything, and does this result from their training or from knowing which books to buy and fads to follow—or are there other things about these homes, families, neighborhoods, friends, schools, and so on that account for this pattern?

Consider obesity. Preschool-aged children are more likely to be obese if they have unhealthy habits like watching too much TV, eating on irregular schedules, or not getting enough sleep. Maybe educated parents do better to prevent these things because of their know-how or other resources. But the same research that shows these factors matter also shows that mothers' education itself matters more—even when their effects are statistically controlled.¹⁴

To illustrate the strength of this relationship, I measured the association of mothers' education level and their children's obesity using a sample

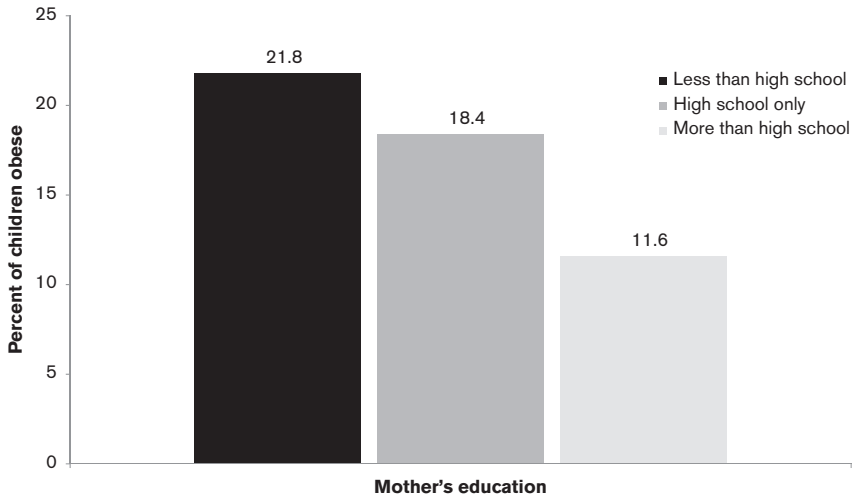


Figure 4. Mother's education and children's obesity rate. With statistical controls for age, sex, race/ethnicity, family structure, mother's age, and number of siblings (limited to children living with their mothers). Source: Author's analysis of the 2011–12 National Survey of Children's Health, available by special request from the Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health, childhealthdata.org/help/dataset.

of almost forty thousand children ages ten to seventeen who were part of the National Survey of Children's Health. In a statistical analysis that included the child's age, sex, race/ethnicity, family structure, number of siblings, and mother's education, the last variable had the largest effect. Children of mothers who didn't finish high school had obesity rates almost twice as high as those whose mothers had gone to college when the rest of the variables were controlled (figure 4).

Naturally, income is part of this educational advantage. And part of what rich people do that poor people can't is spend money on their kids. For example, married parents with two children and an income less than \$57,000 per year spend on average \$160,000 on each child from birth to age eighteen—on everything from diapers and food to extra bedrooms and summer camp. For families with incomes of \$100,000 or more, that amount rises to \$370,000.¹⁵ If the difference between poor and rich parents is the ability to pay tuition at a fancy school, or the job contacts they get from

similarly situated coworkers, then we don't need rocket social science to figure out what's happening. But the constant discussion of parenting practices and their effects on children draws us away from those simple mechanisms, as if the simplest explanation for class reproduction is unsatisfying. And the more we scrutinize the effects of parenting practices, the more parents drive themselves to distraction trying to keep up with the latest advice.

Privilege Gone Wrong

News about parenting practices that may help children achieve success fuels the practices that it reports on, in turn leading to more news stories on what the most conscientious parents are doing.¹⁶ And this at least contributes to the decisions by some high-end working women to scale back or drop out of their careers. Once they are no longer employed, these over-achievers apply their many skills to parenting, ratcheting up the pressure on everyone else.¹⁷ Lately we have seen a new battleground in the parenting wars, closely related to social class: vaccinations.

One of the paradoxes of privileged parenting is that some richer parents feel so empowered and efficacious that they reject commoner solutions to children's problems. In a study of twenty-five mothers who rejected vaccines, Jennifer Reich described a group of mothers who saw themselves as professionals with parenting practices so superior that these would overpower the risk of infectious diseases—especially if the mothers could keep their children away from unclean *others* (I'm paraphrasing, of course).¹⁸ The sociological irony is that through what they see as advantageous individualistic behavior rich parents are creating collective outcomes that may be extremely harmful.

In 2015 an epidemic of nonvaccination in California led to a strict new law clamping down on vaccine exemptions.¹⁹ But before the law changed we got a great look at the pitfalls of intensive parenting. One key element of vaccine avoidance is that, although it's motivated by individualism, it's a practice of groups. And one way such groups are organized and maintained may be by interacting in and around schools—hot spots for parenting fads and identity performance.

When California posted its vaccination rate data, Kieran Healy did some great visualizations of rates across schools.²⁰ I followed his links to

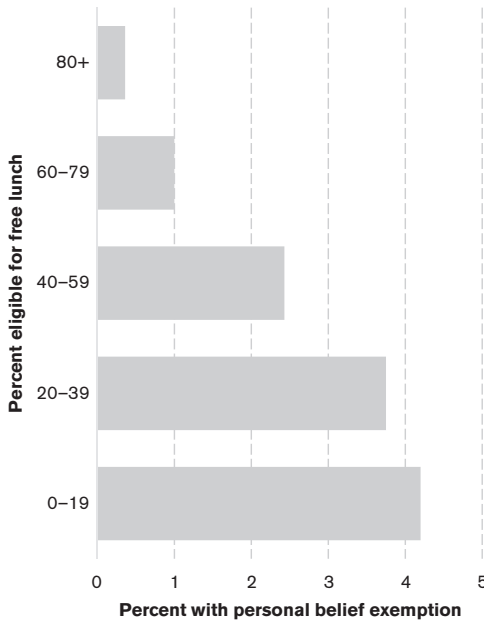


Figure 5. Kindergartners with vaccine personal belief exemptions, by school free-lunch eligibility rate. Private schools excluded because free-lunch data were unavailable.

the data and did some more descriptive work, adding more information on school type and poverty levels. Vaccine exemptions were listed as “Personal Belief Exemptions” (PBEs) in the data; these are the forms by which a parent at the time opted out of the immunization requirement for starting school. I counted up the PBE rate in kindergarten for just under seven thousand schools.²¹

It’s hard to say what percentage of kids need to be immunized for different diseases to achieve the proper level of community (“herd”) protection, so I arbitrarily calculated percentage of kids attending schools with more than 5 percent exempt. It’s clear the problem of vaccine exemptions is concentrated in private and, especially, charter schools: just 11 percent of public school kindergartners were in schools with 5 percent or more PBEs, compared with 30 percent of private school kids and 36 percent of those in charter schools. So private and charter schools are clearly hotbeds of nonvaccination. But there is a more general social class pattern as well, as revealed by the free-lunch eligibility data (figure 5). The relationship between exemption rates and percentage of children eligible for free lunch

is negative and very strong—the more poor kids there are, the fewer parents are demanding exemptions from vaccines.

Interestingly, although the relationship between poverty and exemptions is strong in both charter and regular public schools, it is *stronger* in the charter schools. That is, the difference in exemption rates between rich and poor charter schools is greater than it is in regular public schools. My guess is that charter schools do not per se promote vaccine exemption. But because they are more parent driven, or recruit certain types of parents, charter schools are more ideologically homogeneous. And because antivaccine ideology is concentrated among richer parents, charter schools provide them with a fertile ground in which to generate and transmit antivaccine ideas. That's why, although richer parents in general are driving vaccine denial, it's especially concentrated in charter schools. This seems consistent with the general echo-chamber nature of information sharing in cultural niches and the clustered, contagious nature of parenting fads.

The vaccine story seems to contradict the rich-parents-are-awesome idea, especially if you think rich people's parenting is great because more educated parents have more knowledge about what matters for kids. So it's an important caution for the general argument that social class status is passed from generation to generation because of the difference in parenting quality between richer and poorer parents. There is a mix of causal factors in the story of social class reproduction, including parenting decisions and more purely monetary benefits.

What is the best policy response to this situation? I would say public policy should help people be better parents but also reduce the gap in outcomes between children with better and worse parents. We already do that, of course—that's what schools are for—but we could do it better. If there is a social class gap in nutritional standards at home, for example, we provide good nutrition for all children at school. If poor parents don't have time and resources to provide sufficient child care and supervision, we can provide subsidies to make high-quality child care available to everyone. And so on. We can't mandate equal treatment of everyone at all times, but we can do a lot to mitigate the unequal consequences of parenting practices for children.



Figure 6. Children playing on seesaws at East Hill School in Ithaca, New York, circa 1970. Photo courtesy of the History Center in Tompkins County.

4. PARENTING SURVIVOR BIAS

Children's play used to be very dangerous. In 1910, about two hundred children were killed in the streets of New York City, most of them playing in the streets, doing work for their families, or just wandering around unattended. There were no public playgrounds in New York in 1910, but a few generations later parents were demanding safe places for their kids to play.²²

Figure 6 shows the playground at my elementary school in Ithaca, New York. Those seesaws were great fun until the other kid got bored and hopped off while you were in the up position. I myself survived such a fall onto the broken-glass-strewn asphalt, with a nasty scrape to show for it (attended to by the school secretary; there was no "school nurse" back then). This kind of harsh experience made me the tough sociologist I am today. And what made me a wimp compared to 1910 kids made me gritty compared with 2010 kids. What does not kill us makes us stronger, goes the myth.

While some modern parents are trying to ease the way for the children's success, others are embracing the goal of training children to overcome

adversity, to build up their *grit* (like the privileged parents who want to self-make their kids' immune systems by denying them vaccines). This concept was recently embraced by journalist Brigid Schulte in her book *Overwhelmed* and trashed by education critic Alfie Kohn in *The Myth of the Spoiled Child*.²³ In addition to the confusion caused by receiving competing messages from experts, however, people's judgment is frequently corrupted by a common logical problem: survivor bias.

In a society that loves (to a fault) rags-to-riches stories, the neurosurgeon, motivational author, presidential candidate, and secretary of housing and urban development Ben Carson stands out as a man who rose from a poor Black family in Detroit to the pinnacle of professional success. One day on the campaign trail in 2016, Carson was retelling the mythical tale of how he was able to overcome being the kid nicknamed Dummy because his mother, who herself could barely read, required her children to read books.²⁴ She had turned their adversity into success, and Carson had emerged victorious.

"As a fifth-grade student, I was a horrible student," he told his Iowa audience. "Anybody here in fifth grade?" When a group of kids raised their hands, he asked, "Who's the worst student?" To his surprise, rather than just getting a chuckle, as he was accustomed to from adult audiences, Carson saw all the kids pointing at one of their own, a boy named Seth. The scene quickly went viral, making Carson look like a bully who had embarrassed an innocent, underperforming kid on a national stage. But Carson was serious. When his staff, doing quick damage control, brought Seth back to meet the candidate for a photo after the speech, Carson said to him, "You know what we're going to want for you, right? You're going to be a neurosurgeon, ok? But all you have to do, to turn it around, is *read*. I just started reading, I got to the point that it was my favorite thing in life. It didn't take long before I knew more than all those people who said I was dumb. So you do that, too, ok?"

This is an extreme example of survivor bias, identifying a single trait from an anomalous case and attributing the outcome to that quality. It's not surprising that the one child to rise from Carson's classroom to become a wealthy doctor read a lot, but that is not evidence that reading is the one ingredient necessary for success. The classic example of this is the hucksters who sell stock advice based on post hoc analysis of successful companies,

recommending that people copy arbitrary bits of their practices.²⁵ Of course, reading is good, so this isn't bad advice. But it's still survivor bias because it's attributing a very unlikely outcome to a common trait—and turning that into single-minded advice: “Just read!” (I'll discuss the structural barriers to success for Black children in Detroit later, in chapter 7.)

When you apply survivor bias to something from your past that was really bad—that is, not just a single trait but a specific bad experience—you reproduce a common American meme: I am the person I am today because of the bad things that happened to me (implication: so stop complaining and get to work).

Take spanking. NFL player Adrian Peterson, caught beating his four-year-old son with a stick, said, “I have always believed that the way my parents disciplined me has a great deal to do with the success I have enjoyed as a man.”²⁶ His logical error is the same at Carson's.

Consider a lifeboat with a dozen children. If just one boy survived, he would probably say, “I have always believed that my lifeboat experience has a great deal to do with the success I have enjoyed as a man.” Who could blame him? That's the experience through which he sees everything that follows. And Americans might agree with his explanation, buying his books and paying to attend his motivational speeches. That's a survivor bias: the people who should be dragging down the average aren't there to weigh in.

Further, if you just look at a dozen famous neurosurgeons and find that every one of them read a lot as a child, that would seem like an open-and-shut case for reading. Or if you find a dozen professional football players who were beaten as kids. But without knowing how many kids experienced the same things and failed, you have no idea whether those experiences are generally useful at all. People who suffer and succeed often incorrectly attribute their success to what they suffered.

Spanking is so common and so widespread in the United States—especially among marginalized groups—that it's hard to say it caused anyone's success. In 2014, the General Social Survey found that 70 percent of Americans agreed with the statement “It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking.”²⁷ But when you break that down by race, gender, and the region people lived in when they were children, you find it rises as high as 88 percent among Black men who, like Peterson, are from the South (figure 7).

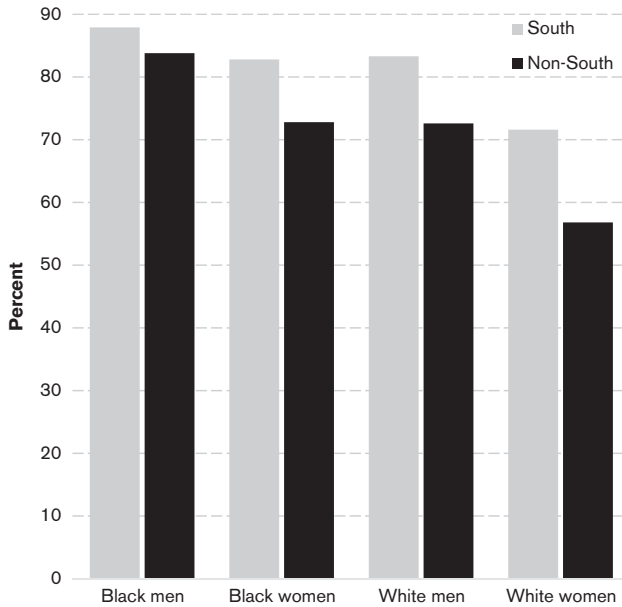


Figure 7. Percentage agreeing with the statement “It is sometimes necessary to discipline a child with a good, hard spanking”: by race, gender, and region of residence at age sixteen. Source: Author analysis of the 2008–14 General Social Survey, available from the data archive at Survey Documentation and Analysis, sda.berkeley.edu/.

In the discussion of corporal punishment that surrounded the Peterson scandal, several Black commentators said harsh discipline was a matter of survival for Black children. *New York Times* columnist Charles Blow put it this way: “I understand the reasoning that undergirds much of this thinking about spanking: Better to feel the pain of being punished by someone in the home who loves you than by someone outside the home who doesn’t.”²⁸ And sociologist Michael Eric Dyson connected the practice directly to slavery and southern plantations: “Black parents beat their children to keep them from misbehaving in the eyes of whites who had the power to send black youth to their deaths for the slightest offense. Today, many black parents fear that a loose tongue or flash of temper could get their child killed by a trigger-happy cop. They would rather beat their offspring than bury them.”²⁹

With physical discipline nearly ubiquitous among southern Blacks a generation or more ago—and still pervasive today—it’s probably impossible to determine whether today’s Black adults benefited from the experience. (Overall, research shows that corporal punishment is more often harmful than helpful for children’s subsequent development.)³⁰ But if spanking were a reasonable adaptation to racism and its attendant hardships, necessary for children to toughen up and learn to follow orders so they don’t get killed by Whites, why would Black men support it more than Black women? Maybe Black men were disciplined more harshly when they were kids and therefore are more likely to see it as part of what helped them survive or succeed.

The people who think corporal punishment helps children because it helped them are not alone among the survivors of difficult childhoods. But that doesn’t mean they’re right.

Real Survivors

On top of the logical error of survival bias is a more subtle effect that is real: survival selection. It is real because the one lifeboat guy who lived was probably not randomly chosen to survive the ordeal—he was probably the healthiest in the first place, or maybe the meanest (shoving everyone off the boat and drinking their water). This makes his story, like Carson’s and Peterson’s, seem more credible, even though lifeboat populations have very high mortality and the lifeboat is not actually what made the survivor stronger. Harsh experiences may weed out weaker people, but that doesn’t mean the harsh experience was actually good for the survivor. Avoiding the whole lifeboat experience is probably the best policy.

You can see this in another example, the “Black-White mortality crossover,” a classic demographic puzzle I did some work on in graduate school.³¹ Here’s how it works. In the United States overall, Whites have a life expectancy 4.5 years longer than Blacks. At birth, they are projected to live to 78.7 versus 74.2 years respectively (all these numbers are for non-Hispanics). But at very advanced ages, Blacks have lower mortality rates than Whites in any given year; the crossover occurs at age 88 in the 2009 data (figure 8).

There are two explanations for this pattern. First, to live to old age in Black America you have to be tough. Infant mortality alone is 2.3 times

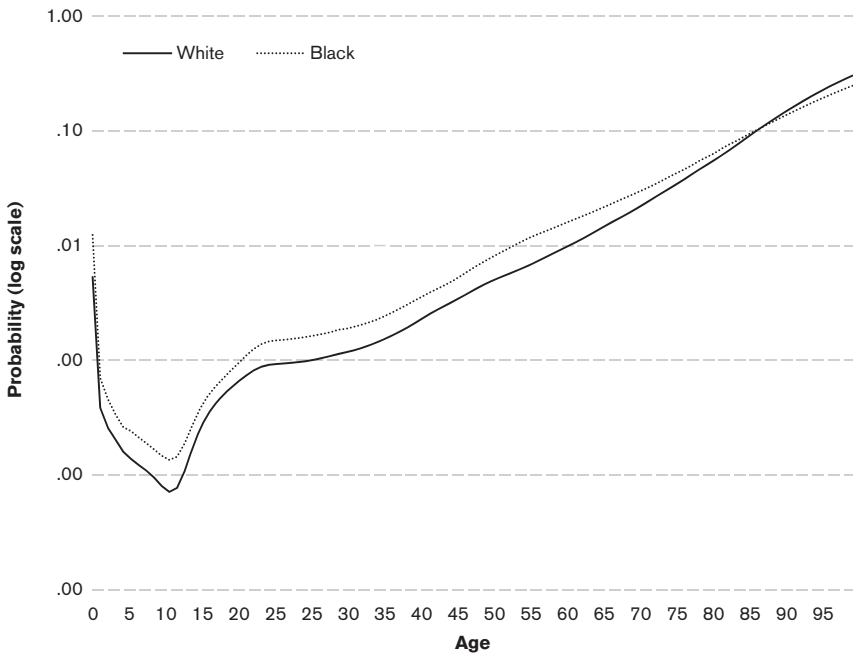


Figure 8. Probability of death, non-Hispanic Blacks and Whites by age, 2009.
Source: Author analysis of data from the National Center for Health Statistics.

higher for Black babies than for Whites, and the gap remains large through most of adulthood. This creates a survivor selection effect. Because of the greater risks to their health at younger ages, Blacks in America have had to run a survival gauntlet to get to old age. From birth, 89 percent of Whites can expect to live at least to age sixty, compared with only 82 percent of Blacks. The most hardy Black people are most likely to make it through, and as a result they are less prone to dying than the Whites who had a relative cakewalk to old age. The other reason is actually a data error: Blacks at older ages are more prone to exaggerating their ages, meaning some of those people over age eighty-eight aren't quite as old as they say (and birth records weren't that good for Blacks in 1920, especially in the South). Even a little rounding up is enough to skew the race differences at old ages, because the rates rise a lot with every year of age. This exaggeration is

actually a cultural expression of the survivor effect—it shows that it’s a badge of honor to have made it through that gauntlet.

The Black-White mortality crossover means that, although Whites live longer than Blacks overall, at older ages there are Black survivors who feel justifiably proud of their longevity (and might even attribute it to the hardships they experienced).

Making the best of a bad situation might be a good practice for survivors, and not a bad lesson to impart to our children, but in the end most bad experiences are actually bad.

5. SANTA’S MAGIC, CHILDREN’S WISDOM, AND INEQUALITY

Eric Kaplan, channeling Francis Pharcellus Church, writes in favor of Santa Claus in the *New York Times*. The Church argument, written in 1897, is that (a) you can’t prove there is no Santa, so agnosticism is the strongest possible objection, and (b) Santa enriches our lives and promotes nonrationalized gift giving, “so we might as well believe in him.”³² It’s a very common argument, identical to one employed against atheists in favor of belief in God, but more charming and whimsical when directed at killjoy Santa deniers.

All harmless fun and existential comfort food. But we have two problems that the Santa situation may exacerbate. The first is science denial, and the second is inequality. So consider this an attempted joyicide.

Science

From Pew Research comes this Christmas news: “In total, 65% of U.S. adults believe that all of these aspects of the Christmas story—the virgin birth, the journey of the magi, the angel’s announcement to the shepherds and the manger story—reflect events that actually happened.”³³ On some specific items, the scores were even higher. The poll found 73 percent of Americans believe that Jesus was born to a virgin mother—a belief shared even by 60 percent of college graduates. (Among Catholics agreement was 86 percent, and among Evangelical Protestants 96 percent.)

So the Santa situation is not an isolated question. We're talking about a population with a very strong tendency to express literal belief in fantastical accounts. This Christmas story may be the soft leading edge of a more hardcore Christian fundamentalism. For the past twenty years, the General Social Survey (GSS) has found that a third of American adults agree with the statement "The Bible is the actual word of God and is to be taken literally, word for word," versus two other options: "The Bible is the inspired word of God but not everything in it should be taken literally, word for word" and "The Bible is an ancient book of fables, legends, history, and moral precepts recorded by men." (The "actual word of God" people are less numerous than the Virgin Birth believers, but the two beliefs are related.)

Using the GSS for the years 2010–14, I analyzed people's social attitudes according to their view of the Bible (see figure 9). Controlling for their sex, age, race, and education, and the year of the survey, those with more literal interpretations of the Bible were much more likely than the rest of the population to

- Oppose marriage rights for gay men and lesbians
- Agree that "people worry too much about human progress harming the environment"
- Agree that "it is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family"

In addition, among non-Hispanic Whites, people believing in the literal truth of the Bible were more likely to rank Blacks as more lazy than hard-working and to believe that Blacks "just don't have the motivation or will-power to pull themselves up out of poverty."³⁴

This isn't the direction I'd like to push our culture. Of course, teaching children to believe in Santa doesn't necessarily create "actual word of God" fundamentalists—but there's some relationship there.

Children's Ways of Knowing

In 1932 Margaret Mead challenged the notion that young children not only knew less, but knew differently, than adults, in a way that paralleled

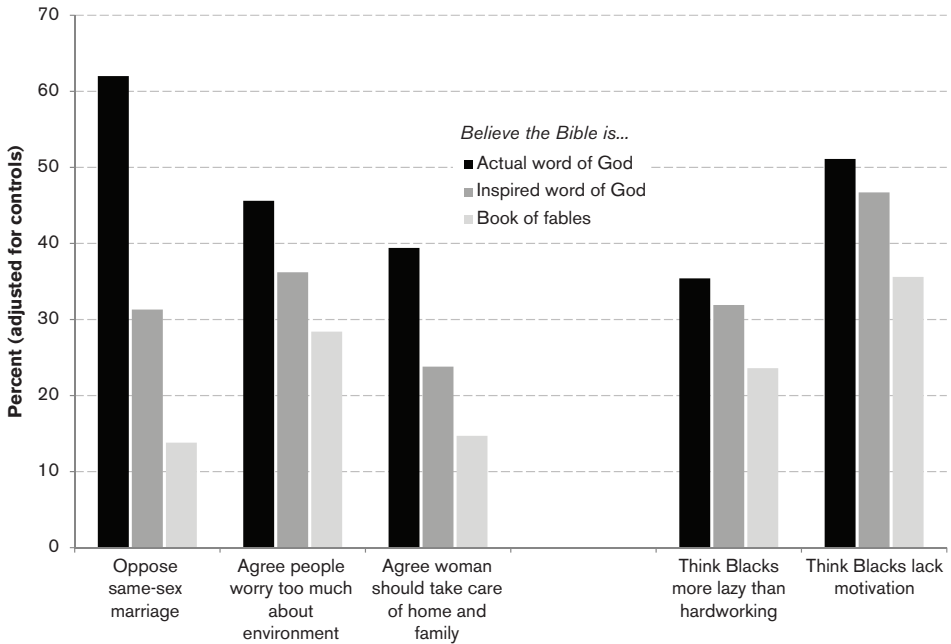


Figure 9. How social attitudes differ according to view of the Bible. Percentages shown are adjusted for age, sex, education, and race/ethnicity. Attitudes toward Blacks shown for non-Hispanic Whites only. Source: Author analysis of the 2010–14 General Social Survey available from the data archive at Survey Documentation and Analysis, sda.berkeley.edu/.

the evolution of society over time. Children were thought to have thought processes much like those of “savages,” with animism in “primitive” societies being similar to the spontaneous thought of young children. This went along with the idea that believing in Santa was indicative of a state of innocence. In pursuit of empirical confirmation of the universality of childhood, Mead investigated the Manus tribe in Melanesia, who were pagans, to look for magical thinking in children: “animistic premise, anthropomorphic interpretation and faulty logic.”³⁵

Instead, she found “no evidence of spontaneous animistic thought in the uncontrolled sayings or games” of a few dozen children over five months of continuous observation. And while adults in the community attributed mysterious or random events to spirits and ghosts, children

never did: “I found no instance of a child’s personalizing a dog or a fish or a bird, of his personalizing the sun, the moon, the wind or stars. I found no evidence of a child’s attributing chance events, such as the drifting away of a canoe, the loss of an object, an unexplained noise, a sudden gust of wind, a strange deep-sea turtle, a falling seed from a tree, etc., to supernaturalistic causes.”³⁶

On the other hand, adults blamed spirits for hurricanes hitting the houses of people who behaved badly, believed statues could talk, thought lost objects had been stolen by spirits, and said people who were insane were possessed by spirits. The grown men all thought they had personal ghosts looking out for them—with whom they communicated—but the children dismissed the reality of the ghosts that were assigned to them. They didn’t play ghost games.

Does this mean magical thinking is not inherent in childhood? Mead wrote: “The Manus child is less spontaneously animistic and less traditionally animistic than is the Manus adult [*traditionally* here referring to the adoption of ritual superstitious behavior]. This result is a direct contradiction of findings in our own society, in which the child has been found to be more animistic, in both traditional and spontaneous fashions, than are his elders. When such a reversal is found in two contrasting societies, the explanation must be sought in terms of the culture; a purely psychological explanation is inadequate.”³⁷

Maybe people have the natural capacity for both animistic and realistic thinking, and societies differ in which capacity they nurture and develop through children’s education and socialization. Mead speculated that the pattern she found had to do with the self-sufficiency required of Manus children. A Manus child, she wrote, must “make correct physical adjustments to his environment, so that his entire attention is focused upon cause and effect relationships, the neglect of which would result in immediate disaster. . . . Manus children are taught the properties of fire and water, taught to estimate distance, to allow for illusion when objects are seen under water, to allow for obstacles and judge possible clearance for canoes, etc., at the age of two or three.”³⁸ Further, perhaps in contrast to our own industrialized society’s complex technology, the simple technology of the Manus is understandable to children without the invocation of magic. And she observed that parents didn’t tell the children imaginary stories, myths, and legends.

I should note here that I'm not saying we have to choose between religious fundamentalism and a society without art and literature. The question is about believing things that aren't true and can't be true. I'd like to think we can cultivate imagination without launching people down the path of blind credulity.

Modern Credulity

For evidence that culture produces credulity, consider the results of a study that showed most four-year-old children understood that Old Testament stories were not factual. Six-year-olds, however, tended to believe the stories were factual, *if* their impossible events were attributed to God rather than rewritten in secular terms (e.g., "Matthew and the Green Sea" instead of "Moses and the Red Sea").³⁹ Why? Belief in supernatural or superstitious things, contrary to what you might assume, requires a higher level of cognitive sophistication than does disbelief, which is why five-year-olds are more likely to believe in fairies than three-year-olds.⁴⁰ These studies suggest children have to be taught to believe in magic. (Adults use persuasion to do that, but teaching with rewards—like presents under a tree or money under a pillow—is of course more effective.)

Children can know things either from direct observation or experience or from being taught. So they can know dinosaurs are real if they believe books and teachers and museums, even if they can't observe them living (true reality detection). And they can know that Santa Claus and imaginary friends are not real if they believe either authorities or their own senses (true baloney detection). Similarly, children also have two kinds of reality-assessment errors: false positive and false negative. Believing in Santa Claus is false positive. Refusing to believe in dinosaurs is false negative. In figure 10, which I adapted from a paper by Jacqueline Woolley and Maliki Ghossainy, true judgment is in regular type, errors are in italics.⁴¹

We know a lot about kids' credulity (Santa Claus, tooth fairy, etc.). But according to Woolley and Ghossainy their skepticism has been neglected: "Development regarding beliefs about reality involves, in addition to decreased reliance on knowledge and experience, increased awareness of one's own knowledge and its limitations for assessing reality status. This realization that one's own knowledge is limited gradually inspires a

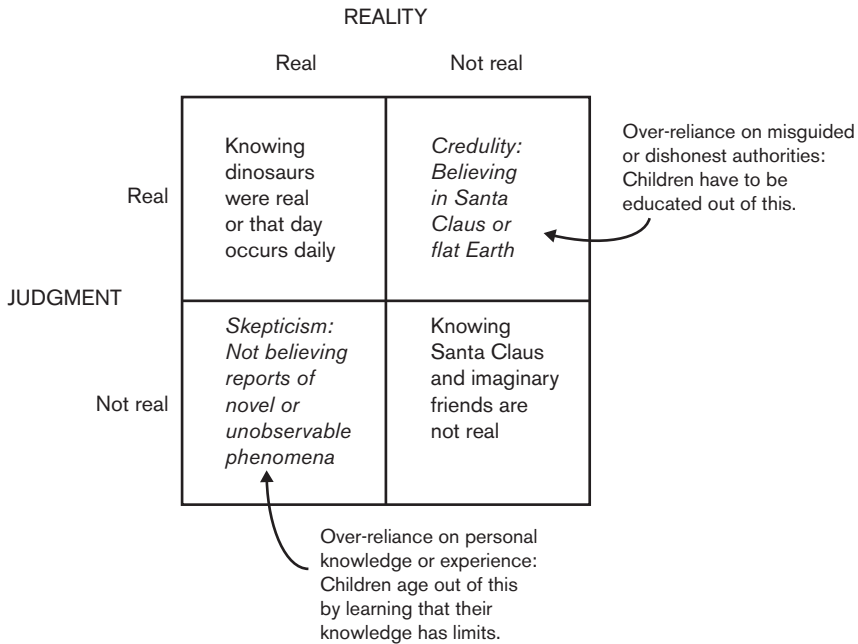


Figure 10. True knowledge, false positives, and false negatives in how children think.

waning reliance on it alone for making reality status decisions and a concomitant increase in the use of a wider range of strategies for assessing reality status, including, for example, seeking more information, assessing contextual cues, and evaluating the quality of the new information.”⁴²

The “realization that one’s own knowledge is limited” is a vital development, ultimately necessary for being able to tell fact from fiction. But, sadly, it need not lead to real understanding: indeed, under some conditions, such as, apparently, those in the United States today, it often leads instead to reliance on misguided or dishonest authorities who compete with science to fill the void beyond what we can directly observe or deduce. Believing in Santa because we can’t disprove his existence is a developmental dead end, a backward-looking reliance on authority for determining truth. But so is failure to believe in vaccines or evolution or climate change just because we can’t see them working.

We have to learn how to avoid the italics boxes without giving up our love for things imaginary, and that seems impossible without education in both science and art.

Rationalizing Gifts

What is the essence of Santa, anyway? In Kaplan's *New York Times* essay it's all about nonrationalized giving, or giving for the sake of giving. The latest craze in Santa culture, however, says otherwise: Elf on the Shelf, which exploded on the Christmas scene after 2008, selling in the millions. In case you've missed it, the idea is to put a cute little elf somewhere on a shelf in the house. You tell your kids that it's watching them and that every night it goes back to the North Pole to report to Santa on their nice/naughty ratio. While the kids are sleeping, you move it to another shelf in house, and the kids delight in finding it again each morning.

In other words, it's the latest in Michel Foucault's Panopticon development.⁴³ Consider the Elf on a Shelf aftermarket accessories, like the handy warning labels, which threaten children with "no toys" if they aren't on their "best behavior" from now on. Is this nonrationalized gift giving? Quite the opposite. In fact, rather than cultivating a whimsical love of magic, Elf on a Shelf is closer to a dystopian fantasy in which the conjured enforcers of arbitrary moral codes leap out of their fictional realm to impose harsh consequences in the real lives of innocent children.

Inequality

My developmental question regarding inequality is this: What is the relationship between belief in Santa and social class awareness over the early life course? How long after kids realize there is class inequality do they go on believing in Santa? This is where rationalization meets fantasy. Beyond worrying about how Santa rewards or punishes them individually, if children are to believe that Christmas gifts are doled out according to moral merit, than what are they to make of the obvious fact that rich kids get more than poor kids? Rich or poor, the message seems the same: children deserve what they get.

I can't demonstrate that believing in Santa causes children to believe that economic inequality is justified by character differences between social classes, or that Santa belief undermines future openness to science and logic. But those are hypotheses. Between the antiscience epidemic and the pervasive assumption that poor people deserve what they get, the whole Santa enterprise seems risky. Would it be so bad, so destructive to the wonder that is childhood, if instead of attributing gifts to supernatural beings we told children that we just buy them gifts because we love them unconditionally and want them—and all other children—to be happy?

If parenting practices matter for children—and they must—then family structure must matter as well; before we can ask what effects adult behavior have on children, we have to know which adults we're talking about in the first place. Debating the finer points of parenting may seem like a middle-class pursuit—and middle-class voices do dominate the endless public conversations of this kind—but of course parents at all income levels worry about what they can do to help their children be happy, healthy, and successful. And family structure imposes some crucial limits on their options—the topic to which we turn next.