PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT

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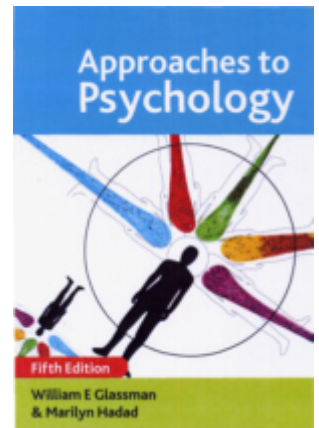
Understanding Development

Despite the many differences among individuals, there are certain basic commonalities in our lives, of which the most obvious is that we are living beings: we are born, we grow, and eventually we die. This much, we all share – and we all know it. But what makes life interesting is the details – and they are both more significant than the basic commonalities, and harder to predict or understand.

Psychologists have been interested in the changes that occur during our lives since the very beginnings of the discipline. John B. Watson, in his famous statement about being able to shape any child to achieve any career, was making an assertion about the power of the environment to shape development; others, from Francis Galton onward, have asserted that our destiny is in our genes. While neither view is likely entirely correct, most of us wish we could better understand the processes that shape our lives – and maybe get a few glimpses of the road that lies ahead. What really does shape our personality? What makes a good parent? And what determines if someone is happy and active in old age, or bitter and withdrawn? While no one has complete answers to any of these questions, developmental psychologists, drawing on all of the five approaches, are gaining an increasingly detailed picture of the processes that influence the way we grow and change.

It is impossible to cover all aspects of development, either here or in the text. Instead, you should consider this a starting point in exploring development in general, and possibly your own development.

Resources

Developmental Stages

Several pages, providing a basic overview of general developmental concepts. Part of grad student Andy Dannelley's psychology site.

Approaches to Personality Development

The idea that individuals have distinctive personalities has a long history – for example, five hundred years ago, Shakespeare made references to temperament in his plays, and the concept was old even then. Today, most of us accept the idea that individuals show some consistency in behaviour over time and across situations, and we describe this consistency as representing the individual's 'personality'. Indeed, social psychologist George Kelley once commented that "in everyday life, we are all personality theorists"! As obvious as the idea seems, however, the study of personality is not without controversy. In fact, psychologists of different approaches have very different views of what produces the behavioural consistency we call personality – or even whether it really exists.

Not surprisingly, psychologists favouring the Biological approach tend to see personality as based on hereditary processes. In the past century, a model of personality based on body shape was developed by William Sheldon, who argued that body type was closely related to **temperament**, and therefore personality. Sheldon's model, like many personality theories which seek to categorise people into a limited number of types, tended to oversimplify differences among individuals, and is generally regarded by most psychologists as invalid. However, in the past decade, there has been a resurgence of interest in the role of temperament as a factor in personality, and a variety of studies, by Stella Chess, Jerome Kagan, and others, have provided new understanding of temperament as an innate characteristic.

By contrast, Behaviourists have questioned whether personality is anything more than an imaginary construct. Since Behaviourists see individual differences as the product of

prior learning, consistency (if it occurs at all in behaviour) would simply reflect that the environment is relatively consistent.

Similarly, Cognitive psychologists like Walter Mischel have questioned the notion that personality reflects any innate process; instead, Mischel and similar theorists focus on a combination of mental schemata and environmental influences. The idea that mental schemata influence behaviours can be traced back to the pioneering work of Jean Piaget, who believed that basic cognitive processes of **assimilation** and **accommodation** underlie all of our interactions with the world. More recently, theorists like Lawrence Kohlberg have extended the idea of cognitive structures to areas like moral development.

Psychodynamic theorists of course see behaviour in terms of the processes that motivate our behaviour. From this point of view, personality develops out of the interaction of basic drives and environmental experience. Freud's theory is certainly the best known psychodynamic theory, but other models build on a similar interaction of mental processes and environmental influences.

The Humanistic Approach emphasises healthy growth, and argues that other approaches (notably the Psychodynamic) fail because they offer no clear description of what it means to develop in a healthy way. Curiously, though, the primary Humanistic theories provide little detail about the process of growth. As the text discusses, Rogers favors a process orientation, rather than suggesting there are discrete stages of development, but in the end the Humanistic Approach is less than satisfying as a model for understanding the details of development.

Resources

The Personality Project

Extensive site by William Revelle at Northwestern University, covering most aspects of personality theory, with both original content and a variety of links; includes a 1995 *Annual Review* paper by Revelle.

Great Ideas in Personality

Well-organised site with extensive material on many aspects of personality theory and research; maintained by psychologist Scott Acton of Northwestern University.

Personality: Theory & Perspectives

A public-domain on-line course in personality theory, covering all of the five approaches; developed by James Neill of the University of Canberra.

Biological

Sheldon's Body and Temperament Types

Chapter from book by Tyra and James Arraj; includes brief self-quiz to explore temperament.

10 Keys to Unlocking Temperament

1996 article by Nancy Olsen, describing research on temperament at Arizona State Univ.

Cognitive

Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

Extensive discussion, with embedded links, by Bill Huitt of Valdosta State Univ. in Georgia.

Piaget's Theory of Development

Online tutorial by Margaret Anderson, SUNY at Cortland.

Jean Piaget: Father of Developmental Psychology

Interesting overview, covering both Piaget's life and his theories; from BrainConnection.com.

Kohlberg's Theory and the Heinz Dilemma

A description of Kohlberg's theory and one of the classic problems which he used to explore moral judgements; from About.com's psychology site.

Kohlberg's Theory of Moral Development

A detailed overview of Kohlberg's theory, but not current (reprinted from 1985 text by W.C. Crain).

Moral Development

Good overview of the topic, covering Piaget and Kohlberg, as well as domain theory and the work of Carol Gilligan; created by Mary Elizabeth Murray, of the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Psychodynamic

Facts for Families

Brief essays on various developmental topics from a psychodynamic perspective; part of American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry site.

Humanistic

Phenomenological Perspectives on Personality

Brief overview from James Neill's on-line course.

Approaches to Sex Role Development

One of the most obvious differences between individuals is the fact that two physical sexes exist. Physical gender is often seen as determining many aspects of behaviour, but one needs to be careful in thinking about **sex roles** (behaviours associated with sex differences), because some **gender roles** vary across cultures (and hence seem to be partly learned), and **sexual orientation** is not based simply on one's sex. Indeed, understanding the many ways in which behaviour is (or is not) determined by sex is one of the most challenging areas in developmental research.

In this area, as in many aspects of development, the different approaches often have different points of view. Today, however, the primary focus of debate is often about whether the observed differences in gender roles and sexual orientation are primarily due to heredity or environment. When expressed in these terms, it often becomes a debate between the Biological Approach and all the others.

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Resources

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Gender Roles

About Gender

Online text discussing gender roles from a variety of approaches, as well as a variety of material about other aspects of gender; site developed by Jed Bland of Derby TV (UK).

The Significance of Gender

Abstracts from 1997 special issue of *Journal of Social Issues*.

Sex Hormones and Human Cognitive Function

1996 article by psychologist Doreen Kimura, who pioneered studies of gender differences in brain structure and function.

The Neuronal Platonist

1998 journal article interviewing neuropsychologist Michael Gazzaniga on the nature of personality; interview by Shaun Gallagher of Canisius College.

Sexual Orientation

Human Sexual Devlopment

Detailed set of online resources, including curriculum plans, related to all aspects of sexual development and behaviour; run by SIECUS, a non-profit group.

Interpreting the Biological Correlates of Sexual Orientation

Article by psychologist Daryl Bem of Cornell, arguing for interactionist theory of sexual orientation (2000; PDF file). See also 1996 *Psych. Review* article by Bem, outlining his basic theory. (Bem's model argues that gender conformity/nonconformity in sex role behaviour is a significant factor in sexual orientation.)

Applying the Concepts: Effects of Sex-typed TV Commercials

As the Cognitive Approach indicates, it seems that children form gender schemata at a very young age, but the development of such schemata is gradual. Thus a little boy at around age 5 years may recognise that he is a boy and know what are 'boy' clothes and 'boy' behaviours, but he may still think that there is a chance that he will grow up to be a Mommy! Children under the age of 6 years may not have gender constancy, that is, the clear understanding that gender is a permanent and invariant property of the individual. At this time, children may be more easily influenced by the models they see and the messages given them by the media.

Diane Ruble, Terry Balaban, and Joel Cooper wanted to examine the effect of models on children at this point in their cognitive development. They performed an experiment on 100 children, 50 males and 50 females, between the ages of 44 to 77 months (the mean age was 60 months, or 5 years) who attended several nursery schools and kindergartens in the United States. The children were divided into three groups. Two experimental groups contained 40 children in each who watched a cartoon with a commercial. The content of the commercial constituted the independent variable. For one experimental group, the commercial was of same-sex models playing with a Fisher-Price Movie Viewer, a toy that had been previously determined, by children, to be appropriate for both boys and girls. The second experimental group viewed the same commercial, but now the models who played with the toy were the opposite sex from the child. In the control group, 20 children saw the cartoon with no commercial. After viewing the cartoon, children in all groups were left alone with several toys, including the Movie Viewer. The first dependent variable in this experiment was how long each child spent playing with the Movie Viewer. After playtime, the children were asked, individually, how attractive they thought the toys (including the Movie Viewer) were, and whether it would be preferred by a boy or a girl. The answers to these questions were the second and the third dependent variables in the experiment. For further analysis, Ruble and her colleagues interviewed the children to determine whether they were high- gender-constancy, meaning that they understood that their sex would remain the same despite changing conditions, or low-gender-constancy, meaning they thought their gender would change under some conditions.

Ruble and her colleagues found that children with high-gender-constancy played with the Viewer less when they had seen an opposite sex model playing with it in the commercial than when they had seen a same-sex model playing with it, or when they had seen no commercial at all. It appears that the children who viewed their gender as

being permanent wanted little to do with a toy that they had seen a member of the opposite sex playing with. Moreover, these children felt strongly that the Movie Viewer would be more appropriate for a member of the opposite sex.

The children who had not achieved gender consistency, those whose idea of their gender was still rather fluid, viewed the commercial and modeled both the opposite-sex and same-sex children in the commercial, playing with the toy more than the children in the group that had not seen the commercial. These children thought that the Movie Viewer would be equally appropriate for boys or girls, as did children in the control group.

The children with high gender consistency garnered a very different message from the commercial than the children with low-gender-consistency: they learned what is 'appropriate' for boys and girls. During the time when children are 'firming up' their concepts of gender, they seem to have a perceived need to regulate behaviour in terms of a gender-typed label. Also, they seem to gather information on appropriateness for their own gender and for the opposite gender from whatever source they can and as quickly as they can. In this way, children at this stage seem to be most susceptible to the role of models in terms of information gathering. It seems amazing, but the evidence indicated that only one viewing of a commercial could influence children with gender constancy to view a toy in a gender stereotypic way, even though the toy had been prejudged by other children to have no preferential value to one gender or the other. Such strong effects after a single episode make us more aware of the child as an active information processor who chooses what information is necessary or relevant or important for each developing concept.

Reference

Ruble, D. N., Balaban, T., & Cooper, J. (1981). Gender constancy and the effects of sex-typed televised toy commercials. *Child Development*, *52*. 667-673.

Publications Related to Development

Developmental Psychology

Site for APA journal; includes online table of contents, and selected articles.

British Journal of Developmental Psychology

Site for BPS journal; includes online table of contents, and full text of sample issue.