

Try It Yourself (page 330)

The term 'generation gap' was coined to describe differences in values and preferences between generations which were considered to provide an insurmountable obstacle to mutual understanding. While it is highly debatable whether any such obstacles are truly insurmountable, differences between people of varying generations *do* exist. Explore these yourself by asking a parent, grandparent or some other older adult about their experiences at your age – what were they doing, what they were interested in and so on. Then ask them about their current preferences in music, books, etc. Assuming their current preferences are different from your own, can you decide whether this is due to the age difference, the difference in prior experience, or some other factor? What does this tell you about the difficulties of interpreting developmental research?

When interpreting developmental research that examines differences between age groups, it is very important to determine what differences besides age may exist between these groups if we want to obtain a real understanding of these differences. For example, one of the major changes between the present generation of most students and that of their parents and grandparents is the widespread use of computers and the Internet. These innovations have provided us with many sources of information and entertainment that previous generations were denied. Millions of young people today play video games, a pastime unknown to young people even 30 years ago. Do older people show less interest in video games because they are older or because they didn't grow up with them as part of daily life? Is the possibility that older people's eyesight may be less acute than younger people's the cause? Or the fact that their reflexes may be slower? Or the idea that to them 'playing games' may have the connotations of something childish which they find distasteful? To find out about the different preferences of older and younger people may be interesting, but the 'whys' of the differences are even more fascinating. And much, much, more difficult!

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A few years ago, a well-known television talk show host was trying to alert the public to the dangers of physical punishment administered to children. Attempting to arouse empathy, she asked adults to imagine how they would feel if they were beaten for mistakes. She then went on to state that this is how children feel, that they are little adults who simply haven't learned as much as adults have. Do you think she was correct in her interpretation of childhood? If not, why not?

She was well-intentioned, but not correct. There is a great deal of evidence that demonstrates that children's thinking changes qualitatively as they get older. They understand and interpret their experiences in the world differently as a result of both their growing experience and their ways of thinking. For example, a 4 year old child has not yet acquired the ability to interpret situations from anything but the most immediate and personal of perspectives. This child may see being beaten as a reflection on their general worth as a human being, not as a consequence of their single mistake, or attributable perhaps to their parent's momentary bad mood. It seems clear that the child will be affected much more severely by the corporal punishment than the older person will.

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When MH was four years old (so the family story goes), she watched eagerly as her father made her a slice of toast and put butter and then jam on it for her. But to her dismay, Daddy didn't put enough jam on the toast. She complained, "The butter's looking through at me!" This illustrates two biases in the thinking of a small child: First, the butter is assumed to have humanlike qualities as it looks at her (Piaget termed this **animism**) Second, she saw the world in terms of how it related to her, with the butter specifically looking at *her*—what Piaget called **egocentrism**.

Ask your parents or other family members if they can recall 'funny' things you said when you were small. Do these 'funny' statements reveal the particular way a small child thinks?

To see differences in the way children think for yourself, talk to children of different ages and ask them questions, such as why the sun seems to set in the west each evening, or why it sometimes rains. Do you find that at different ages children have widely disparate explanations for such phenomena? Are animism and egocentrism revealed by the children you speak to?

There is a very good chance that you will see animism and egocentrism revealed by young children, and your family probably has stories that reveal these phenomena in you in your early days. One of the clearest areas for seeing these phenomena is in their conceptions of death. The very young child (age 3 to 5 years) believes that Grandpa may be dead, but he can still hear and see what people around him are doing, as long as the casket is open. (Note the animism shown here: all matter has the functions of life, even if it is dead.) And he asks if this means that Grandpa will not be able to take him fishing the next weekend! (Note the egocentrism: Grandpa's death is regarded in terms of how it will affect the child.) The child also believes that if he is very clever, death won't catch him! (Note both the animism in the personification of death and the egocentrism in believing that death will chase him.)

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It's not uncommon to see the children of people with great talent in some area to show such talent as well. In the world of music, for example, the children of talented people such as Frank Sinatra, John Lennon, Woody Guthrie, and Nat King Cole also show musical talent. Can you think of examples of children "taking after" their parents in other fields, such as sports? Do you think this reflects genetics, or environmental influences, or a combination of both?

Assume that there is a gene which affects athletic ability. What sort of environmental factors do you think might interact with it to affect athletic performance? What would enhance it? What might impair it?

It seems most likely that abilities, such as athleticism, are affected by both genetic and environmental factors. All things being equal, a child born with keen eyesight, a muscular build and fast reflexes is more likely to show a talent for sports than a child born with poor sensory functioning, extremely delicate bones and slower reflexes. But environmental factors can affect both children profoundly. If the parents are athletic or interested in sports, they are more likely to expose their children to opportunities to learn and play sports, as well as providing role models that the children wish to imitate. In this case, even the child with fewer genetic endowments for athletics may become a fine athlete, given encouragement and support. If the parents have little interest in athletics, even the child with a strong athletic genetic endowment may not be provided with the opportunities or the encouragement for athletic endeavours, nor with role models who demonstrate interest in participating in sports. This child's athletic performance may not reflect his/her full genetic potential because of these environmental factors.

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Have you had an experience of reuniting with someone you haven't seen for many years?

Did they seem the same to you as they were years ago, or did they seem to have changed?

How do you think they perceived *you*: as the same or changed?

In what ways do you think you are consistent? Try to identify four or five of your traits; then, ask a friend to list what they perceive as your major traits. How do the lists compare? What does this tell you about implicit personality theories? Do you and your friend put the same emphasis on particular traits, or do you emphasize some traits in yourself which your friend finds less noteworthy? Does your friend's list of your traits give you more insight into yourself, or into your friend's view of personality traits?

Most of us are pretty consistent in some core traits over our lifespans. For example, if we were active children, we tend to remain active; if we were emotional children, we tend to remain emotional. But life experiences and our own choices can change many things about us: the class clown may become the sober businessperson, and the fashion-obsessed cheerleader may become a community activist. Usually, when we describe other people, we highlight the personality traits that seem most important to us, not necessarily the ones that are most descriptive of the other person. So when you describe a friend, you may get more insight into what traits you value in yourself than into what your friend is like. Similarly, when you read your friend's description of you, you may get more insight into your friend's values than into how your friend perceives you.

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Are you similar or dissimilar to your parents? For example, do you have "your father's temper" or "your mother's stubbornness"? What do you think accounts for this? Does your explanation fit with one of the approaches discussed? How would each of the five approaches account for the similarities and dissimilarities between you and your parents? Overall, which approach's explanation of personality do you find most compelling?

The Biological Approach would say that you are similar to your parents because you have inherited their genes, while the Behaviourist Approach would contend that you have been reinforced for being like your parents. The Cognitive Approach would suggest that social learning plays a major role in accounting for your similarity to your parents: you formed schemata for understanding the world based on how your role models, your parents, formed their schemata, and similarly, you attend to features in the environment that they attended to, and attribute behaviour the way they attribute behaviour. The Psychodynamic Approach of Freud would point to your resolution of your Oedipal conflict as the reason for your similarity to your same-sex parent: to resolve the conflict, you identified with your same-sex parent, adopting his or her beliefs, values and behaviours. The Humanistic Approach might suggest that conditions of worth were put upon you in childhood that demanded that you think and behave the way your parents did, or that your need for love and belongingness or your need for esteem was only satisfied when you showed behaviours that were similar to your parents. Might there be some truth in all these explanations?

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Does your name immediately reveal your gender to others? If so, have you noticed anyone who knows your name being surprised at seeing you for the first time? Many parents today are giving their children names that do not directly reflect the gender of the child in Western society (e.g., Jordan, Mackenzie, Casey). Why do you think parents are choosing these names? Suppose that parents of a new child, in order to avoid gender-bias, took this farther and decided to raise their new baby as an 'it' rather than as a boy or girl. What would be the advantages of this? What problems might arise? What would each theory predict in terms of the effects this would have on the development of a gender role?

Many parents favour gender equality in society, and often give their children names that do not immediately conjure up a gender stereotype. They may hope, in this way, to encourage people meeting the child not to stereotype them immediately and perhaps act in discriminatory ways, and to encourage the child not to think of himself or herself in stereotypic ways. (Of course, many parents simply pick the name because they like it!)

Raising a child without a gender would reduce the gender-stereotyping that the child would receive, and might make the child more aware of 'its' identity as a human being rather than as a male or female. Problems that may arise in raising a child as an 'it' rather than a he or she include small issues such as which washroom to use in public places and how to sign up for a dating service! Of more concern would be the reaction of society if the child's gender were hidden. After all, the first question we ask when a baby is born is "A boy or a girl?" Given the way that society is formed, could other people adapt to a child without a gender? Would this be seen as 'craziness' or offensive? Would the child then be the recipient of discrimination because of this? And what of the child's own sense of identity? Would the child feel normal and complete without identifying as a male or female? Would the child's genetic sex reveal itself in the child's behaviour, as it did in the children discussed in Box 7.5? The answers to these questions are unknown.

The Biological Approach would suggest that it doesn't matter how a child is raised, the sex of the child will be manifested in the child's behaviour. The Behaviourist Approach would contend that the child would demonstrate behaviours that had been reinforced; if these were not gender-stereotyped behaviours, the child would show no overt signs of being of either sex. The Cognitive Approach would suggest that the child would have to form schemata of 'itself' as a human being rather than as a male or female, which might be difficult since society does not readily conform to this. The child would probably pick up behaviours of both sexes since both males and females might be seen to be equally valuable as role models. In addition, unless otherwise influenced by society, the child would not form attributions of behaviour based on gender-stereotypes. The Psychodynamic Approach of Freud would say that the child would have major psychological problems, that gender is not something that can be overcome by raising. "Anatomy is destiny," said Freud, so raising a child as an 'it' would probably be impossible. Enough confusion would exist for the child, though, that passage through the phallic stage and resolution of the Oedipal conflict would be sorely impeded. Who would the child desire, mother or father? Who would the child identify with, mother or father? While the child's biological sex might determine the answers to these questions, the difficulty the child would have in dealing with these questions would probably make for a mentally unhealthy person. The Humanistic Approach might predict a happier outcome for the child: the child would be free of the conditions of worth to behave in a gender-stereotypic way and be able to explore his or her own preferences for interacting with the world and for identifying himself or herself. Self-actualisation might be easier for this child. But, since the child still lives in society, the drawbacks would become apparent as

the child tried to interact with a world beyond his/her family. Would it be easy to get a job if a potential employer did not know the applicant's gender? If not, how would the child fulfil his/her physical needs? If other people did not accept the lack of gender identification, could the love and belongingness needs or the esteem needs be satisfied? If these needs were not fulfilled, could the child ever hope to self-actualise?