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Developmental Psychology, Overview

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Introduction

The field of developmental psychology has experienced much growth and change over the last century. Expanding from the study of individual psyche and perception, research in this area now includes the study of all aspects of the developing organism from cellular development of gametes to the last breath of the elderly. Developmental psychologists explore social,

emotional, physical, and cognitive development for individuals as well as collectives across the life span. Heated debates of how individuals and groups develop have emerged over the years, however, few developmental psychologists embrace the extremes of these discourses. While the field has not reached consensus on definitive explanations of development, findings from developmental psychology research have significant implications for parenting, education, and policy.

Definition

There have been many definitions of developmental psychology over the years. However different, they all concur that developmental psychology is the study of change over time. This change includes psychological, perceptual, and emotional changes that can impact physical, cognitive, language, and social processes. According to some theoretical perspectives, these changes in turn can be influenced by social, biological, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts. The field of developmental psychology began with a focus on childhood but over time has expanded to include the period from conception to death, with newer research including gene replication prior to conception. Most developmental psychologists would describe the field as spanning from the womb to the tomb.

Keywords

Development; infant, child, and/or adolescent development; human development; life-span development; developmental science

Historical Background

The history of the field of developmental psychology is relatively brief, and the focus of the discipline has shifted as more is understood about individual and group differences. While the underpinnings of developmental psychology can

be seen in the writings of the ancient Greeks, Shakespeare, and Enlightenment theorists, it was not until the late nineteenth century that developmental psychology was formalized as a field. G. Stanley Hall is most frequently credited with the establishment of the discipline with the creation of the *American Journal of Psychology* in 1887 and his two-volume text on *Adolescence* (1904). Hall also collaborated with Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung in their efforts to understand the human psyche. Freud's work proposed that there were distinct stages in development from infancy to adolescence. Hall stressed the importance of the transition to maturity (adolescence), and Jung theorized about the conscious and unconscious mind, paving the way for the study of personality.

Drawing from the stage theories proposed by Freud, Erik Erikson expanded the notion of development from childhood through adulthood. This life-span perspective identified different developmental demands from the first years through old age. Interestingly, these early developmental psychologists did not focus on change over time but rather on how early experiences could be predictive of later-life outcomes (Hunt, 1994).

Shortly after the start of the twentieth century, there was a clear understanding of the importance of studying individual and group differences in development, as demonstrated by Arnold Gesell's creation of growth charts documenting normative development and Théodore Simon and Alfred Binet's efforts to test intelligence. While further establishing the discipline of developmental psychology, many of these efforts had negative consequences, such as providing theories and measurement tools that became ammunition for the eugenics movement.

By the 1920s, behaviorism and the work of John B. Watson, in particular, flourished, drawing attention to the role of the environment in development and providing legitimacy for research in developmental psychology to inform parenting and education. Over subsequent decades, behaviorism expanded with the works of such theorists as B.F. Skinner and Albert Bandura, spawning social learning theories that

included individuals as active contributors to their own development.

Jean Piaget's work was also integral to the notion that individuals are active constructors of their knowledge. A stage theorist, Piaget, highlighted the importance of the biological as well as the environmental aspects of children's lives. Specifically, he noted children's active role in their own cognitive maturity and thus gave rise to constructivist theories of development.

In exploring emotional development, John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, while working with children after World War II, identified the importance of relationships between children and their caregivers (most frequently mothers). This work on attachment conflicted with Watson's explicit instructions for mothers to withhold affection from children and gave rise to another realm of research in developmental psychology interested in socio-emotional growth.

Further expanding the scope of developmental research was Lev Vygotsky's focus on the sociocultural milieu of development. Although written in the Soviet Union in the 1920s–1930s, Vygotsky's work was not translated into English until the 1970s. This delay may have helped Vygotsky's theories gain traction given the era's increasing focus on context. Over the next two decades, Urie Bronfenbrenner developed the ecological (later expanded to bioecological) model of human development. This systems theory posited that humans are embedded in nested reciprocal systems with proximal and distal influences.

Since the end of the last century, the field of developmental psychology has become more expansive with a focus on individuals and groups and the impacts of numerous contributors to development, from genes to cultural settings. Childhood, rather than remaining a monolithic category, has been divided into specific age brackets, including a space between adolescence and adulthood (emerging adults), and increased attention has been paid to aging, especially old age. There is also a greater awareness of how development is affected by structural or social contexts and factors such as poverty, race, and ethnicity.

Traditional Debates

Nature Versus Nurture

One of the most heated and long-running debates in developmental psychology has been the role of nature versus nurture in development. Biological maturational views of development (nature) posit that development is the natural unfolding of genetic programming. While some theorists in this camp ignore any contribution of environment, most acknowledge the influence that environments can have on genotypic expression, with some asserting that genes, actively and passively, select the environments people experience (Scarr & McCartney, 1983). On the other side, supporters of the role of the environment (nurture) have ranged from ignoring any genetic underpinnings of development to focusing on how environments drive the bulk of development, with some variation attributed to biological processes. While this debate harkens back even to the writings of Aristotle, Locke, and Rousseau, most developmental scientists acknowledge that there is no way to disentangle the biological from the environmental, and more recent research has focused on the interplay between nature and nurture in human development. Psychologist Donald Hebb summarized this idea well when he suggested that deciding if nature or nurture contributes more to development is like asking whether length or width contributes more to the area of a rectangle. Like-minded developmental psychologists now appreciate that human development is a product of an interaction between both genes and environments, and new approaches to research address this growing awareness (e.g., dynamic systems theories, bioecological perspectives, gene x environment fit theory, epigenetics). Further, with increasing methods for studying genes, newer research has found that environmental influences can turn genes on and off and that these changes can be passed on over multiple generations of offspring. Thus, the nature/nurture debate is further complicated by the notion that environmental influences are not necessarily confined to the individuals' lifetime.

Continuous Versus Discontinuous Change

While the role of nature and nurture is probably the most debated issue in the field, question of whether development is continuous or discontinuous provides another source of disagreement. Much of the early work in developmental psychology used stage theories to describe development (e.g., Freud, Erikson, Kohlberg, Piaget). The idea that individuals go through qualitative changes over time has been influential in both research and theory. Others, however, have argued that development is a process of gradual quantitative, rather than radical, change (e.g., Vygotsky, Watson). Proponents of theories of continuous change argue that measurement insensitivity might lead to the impression of qualitative change when the gradual process cannot be observed well. Still others question whether different aspects of development undergo different patterns of change, with some aspects being continuous and others discontinuous (e.g., Siegler).

Universal Versus Sociocultural Influences

Another important debate relates to the role of culture in development and whether there are universal processes or if all development is context dependent. This debate connects to the nature/nurture dispute but is not synonymous. Appreciation of cultural influences can be biologically based, such as the notion of experience-dependent brain plasticity, or can be grounded on the belief that individuals are blank slates waiting for culture to shape them. The writings of Piaget and Vygotsky are illustrative of these opposing perspectives, with Piaget viewing developmental processes as universal with culture contributing to variations in timing and complexity and Vygotsky arguing that development is a social process that is driven through cultural exchanges (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). More recently, efforts have been made to synthesize these views by exploring cultural pathways for universal development in which cultural values, ecological contexts, and socialization processes are integrated in addressing developmental needs (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003).

Critical Debates

Research Precision Versus Ecological Validity

Theories of psychological development are heavily influenced by the methods used to study humans (or in some cases animals). Laboratory settings allow for more control over the research situation but are often artificial, generating findings that may not be applicable to real-world settings. As Bronfenbrenner (1977) aptly noted, “much of developmental psychology is the science of the strange behavior of children in strange situations with strange adults for the briefest possible periods of time” (p. 513) and therefore may not be ecologically valid. Additionally, many developmental questions are not amenable to laboratory research. Therefore, naturally occurring experiments, correlational studies, and longitudinal observational research are highly prevalent in the field. While more sensitive to the social and physical context of development, these studies provide challenges in identifying causal relationships and understanding mechanisms of change, especially if they are reciprocal in nature.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues have plagued the field of developmental psychology since its inception. Guidelines for principled procedures of informing participants about research, obtaining assent, and utilizing active, rather than passive, consenting procedures exist; however, ethical quandaries still remain. These issues often arise in the design of interventions with unknown consequences, the decision of whether intervention is warranted at all, and the choices to observe, rather than intervene, in developmental processes (Fisher & Tyron, 1990). Further, the interpretation and dissemination of research findings with and without awareness of how these results might be used to inform policy is another ethical concern. Throughout the field’s history, research in developmental psychology has been used to support established and often inequitable practices (e.g., racial and gender segregation), promote discriminatory policies (e.g., eugenics), and facilitate social change (e.g., integration, compensatory

education). Efforts to use developmental findings to inform sociopolitical practices and policies can be seen throughout the field, from Watson’s *Psychological Care of the Infant and Child* to Zigler’s Project Head Start to Shonkoff and Phillips’ *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*.

Deficit Model Versus Strength-Based Perspectives

Derived from general psychology, it is not surprising that developmental psychology has often used a deficit model to study development, focusing on what hinders or challenges growth. This deficit approach has been used for understanding the effects of trauma and deprivation to assessing the additive impact of risk factors. Only recently has developmental psychology embraced a more strength-based approach, with an appreciation of resilience and a greater focus on what helps individuals excel. As Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi (2000) point out, “Psychology should be able to help document what kinds of families result in children who flourish, what work settings support the greatest satisfaction among workers, what policies result in the strongest civic engagement, and how people’s lives can be most worth living” (p. 5). While identifying risks and ways to fix problems is still the norm within developmental research, the newer focus on strengths is seen most clearly in the area of positive youth development.

Direct Effects, Reciprocal Influences, and Transactional Relationships

As mentioned above, developmental psychology has struggled with how to measure both context and relationships between individuals and their environments. Many traditional methods in developmental research are limited to direct effects and interactions, with little ability to understand reciprocal and transactional relationships. This limitation is especially striking when using quantitative methods that do not allow for nonindependence or reciprocal causation. Conceptually, the field struggles with what to include as the environment of the developing person. While context clearly matters, there is

much debate about how these factors should be included in the study of development. Findings that discrepancy in wealth within a country can be a greater determinant of health and well-being than between-country wealth or that one's sense of agency and civic engagement contribute meaningfully to health (Marmot, 2006) demonstrate the challenges of identifying context. This debate is particularly heated around topics such as how to consider (e.g., include in studies, measure) socioeconomic status and its persistent impact on development.

"Normal" Development and Power

Historically, developmental psychology has used the white, middle class as the standard for measuring typical development (Guthrie, 2003). Since much of the work was done in university settings and because people with higher income and education are more likely to volunteer, these types of participants became overrepresented in research and therefore, their behavior is seen as normative. However, these behaviors do not necessarily represent the diversity of people possible. Using such homogeneous samples ensures the perpetuation of the status quo, by making the dominant group the standard by which to compare others. This pattern is evident in early psychological research in which males were studied and findings were generalized to all others. Some of the most famous and often cited research utilized exclusively male samples such as Milgram's studies of obedience, Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, Zimbardo's prison study, Sherif's Robbers Cave study, and Kohlberg's study of moral development. As Carol Gilligan (1993) argued about moral development research, the studies of development using males as a marker of normative development place female development as inferior to males rather than as different processes.

These uses of homogeneous, dominant groups then can contribute to the power structures that are rarely acknowledged in psychological research (Foucault, 1989). Nonetheless, they are of paramount importance, given that development occurs in a culturally mediated and socially constructed context. As such, development is not just an individual act but a product and

contributor of societal structures (Parker, 1999). Issues of power are also seldom addressed in developmental psychology, and this is especially true when considering differential levels of power within families (e.g., parents and children, men and women), between social roles (e.g., social workers and elderly, teachers and students), across social settings (e.g., low-income communities, orphanages), and through the research process (e.g., researchers and participants). This lack of acknowledgement of power and the determination of what is normative are not commonly discussed, although some theorists have raised some of these questions (e.g., Burman, 2008). While greater effort is being placed on exploring the impacts of such things as racism, discrimination, oppression, sexism, and poverty on developmental trajectories of children (García Coll, 1990), issues of power are not often at the forefront of developmental psychology research.

International Relevance

There is a difference between what the field of developmental psychology knows is beneficial for health and well-being and what is done with people to support their development, especially on a global level. While debates may persist about the impacts of culture and the nature of development, the field has some definitive answers about what is detrimental to growth and what helps individuals to thrive. Nonetheless, little of this knowledge is put into practice. Almost one billion people starve each year, with 85 % of those under 5 years. Preventable injury and illness are the leading cause of death for children, yet limited efforts are made to promote safer environments. Research has repetitively demonstrated the detrimental impact of not having stable caregivers, stimulating environments, or emotional and physical contact, especially for children. Yet countless people experience extreme deprivation around the globe. Thus, while the field's international relevance is high, findings are not adequately used to improve human development.

Practice Relevance

The discipline of developmental psychology has implications for many fields, especially those involving practice. In particular, the study of developmental psychology has practical relevance for parents and other primary caregivers as they investigate ways to care for children that will promote positive developmental trajectories. The field of education draws heavily from developmental psychology to support best practices for working with infants, children, adolescents, emerging adults, adults, and seniors. Work on typical development has been helpful in understanding atypical development and when and how to provide interventions and supports. Social workers and community practitioners benefit from developmental research when designing universal prevention programs and primary and secondary interventions. In addition to the many fields of practice, developmental psychology has significantly informed policy and hopefully, more of the findings related to what helps individuals to thrive will be used to inform future policy and practice.

Future Directions

The field of developmental psychology has grown over that past century, but there remains room for continued growth in our understanding of human development. One promising trajectory for this growth may be through developmental psychologists collaborating with researchers in other disciplines (e.g., sociology, anthropology, medicine, biology, education, economics) and moving toward a larger field of developmental science. While these interdisciplinary perspectives might engender further dispute in the aforementioned areas as well as introduce new debates, these discourses could broaden thinking in the field. By opening communication between researchers and practitioners of many disciplines, we may better achieve holistic understandings of what contributes to healthy development and put that knowledge to better use.

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Online Resources

- American Psychological Association. <http://www.apa.org/index.aspx>
- Adult development and aging. <http://apadiv20.php.ufl.edu/>

Developmental psychology. <http://www.apa.org/about/division/div7.aspx>

Journal of applied developmental psychology. <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/journal/01933973>

The International Society on Infant Studies. <http://www.isisweb.org/view/0/index.html>

Society for research in child development. <http://www.srcd.org/>

Society for Research in Human Development. <http://homepage.psy.utexas.edu/homepage/group/SRHD/>

Deviance

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Introduction and Definition

The notion of *deviance* as a descriptive label for varieties of human thought, feeling, and behavior emerged and evolved specifically within the field of sociology beginning in the mid-twentieth century. The “attitudes,” “behaviors,” and “conditions” (Adler & Adler, 2006) that would come to be classified and studied as “deviant” had theretofore been subject of a variety of descriptive terms and associated theoretical content from within a variety of disciplines (e.g., “moral insanity,” “degeneracy,” “feeble-mindedness,” and more inclusive terms such as “psychopathology”). From its origins, the concept of deviance promised organizational clarity. Forms and patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving as diverse as mental illness, illicit drug use, violent crime, and atypical sexual behavior could be studied and digested more systematically with their shared features delineated and placed within a coherent framework (e.g., Best, 2004). While the term “deviance” itself derives from a statistical appreciation for the ways in which individual cases can vary from an overall mean or average within a population, it has come to refer more directly (and meaningfully) to *violations of social norms*. The conceptualization of deviance, however, has historically been and remains a critical point of contention within the social sciences.

Keywords

Deviance; Deviant; Interactionism; Positivism; Social Control; Social Norms

Conceptualization and Debate

The first and perhaps most essential question one might ask about deviance is also the source of conflict and controversy amongst those who study the subject, namely, what is it that is being studied? As suggested by Erich Goode (2010), there are two general approaches to the study of deviance. The first is variously described as and typically incorporates the underlying philosophical assumptions of, objectivism, positivism, determinism, absolutism, and essentialism. It assumes that deviance is inherently different from convention and, by extension, that deviants have qualities or characteristics that make them categorically different from nondeviants. Rooted in religious traditions and/or naturalistic models of human behavior, what is being studied are violations of social norms, and the purpose of that study is most often to discover generalities and pose explanations of deviance from which policy implications directed toward preventing and controlling deviance and deterring, sanctioning, or treating deviants can be derived. Problematically, this paradigm uncritically accepts that norms are a matter of consensus or widespread agreement, discounts the relativistic nature of those norms, and largely fails to consider the ways in which conflict, power, and social processes shape definitions of and reactions to deviance.

Although many social scientists working from within the positivist paradigm will define deviance straightforwardly as a rule violation, constructionist and critical sociologists (sometimes grouped as *interactionism*) are more likely to regard deviance as a concept, without essential and objective properties, whose meaning is socially constructed. Thus, there is nothing absolute and unchanging about deviance. Meanings are constructed and reconstructed, applied