

# Is the life-span approach essential to human development

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Human development has been a subject of interest among modern researchers. The most prominent theory in human development is the life-p approach which is made up of various concepts. This essay aims to show the importance of the life-p approach by analysing some of the concepts that make up this approach, such as multi-directionality historical location and contextualism among others. This essay will critically analyse some of the assumptions of the life-p approach.

It will also examine arguments against the life-p approach as well as other theories of human development such as Freud's psychoanalytic theory with the aim of showing that this approach is essential for understanding human development. One of the major assumptions of the life-p approach as suggested by Baltes, (1987) is that development is a 'life-long process' by this he meant that developmental changes occur throughout a person's life, from the point of conception till death (Sugarman, 1986). Baltes, (1987) went on to state that development as a life-long process assumes that, no point in a person's developmental life is more important than the other, every period of a person's life is equally important whether it is childhood or aging, they are all important periods of development though this assumption is in direct contradiction to other theorists of human development such as Freud who believed that development ends at childhood and that adulthood is an extended version of childhood and that aging is more of "loss in adaptive capacity" hence does not qualify to be put in the paradigms of development .

This has constituted the gain and loss argument (Baltes, 1987). Research on intelligence has shown that other forms of intelligence which involving

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reviewing of one's life and wisdom emerge in old age and these forms of intelligence are not 'genetically wired from birth' as suggested by Freud and (Baltes, 1987). This goes to show that development is not restricted to certain periods of a person's life but happens up until death; hence the life-p approach is essential in understanding human development.

With the desire to prove the importance of the life-p approach in human development This essay will look at another assumption put forward by life-p theorists which state that development is multi-directional, (Baltes, 1987). This means that human development has different forms and differs in the routes that it takes throughout the developmental process for example the presents of degenerative and growth abilities in a person (Stenberg, Bornstein, Yandell, & Rook, 011). It has also been noted by Li & Freund, (2005) that development as viewed by the life-p theory is not a one way procces of accumulation but that some developmental aspect increase while others decline (Li & Freund, 2005). Research by (cattel and horn, 1982 ) shows that a person consits of two types of intelligance mameley fluid and crystalized intelligence.

According to this research fluid intelligence showed a declining function as compared to cristalized which showed accumulation tendancies (Baltes, 1987) This evidence shows that development is not a one way procces but takes different directions and that includes both childhood development and aiging, reaffirming the point made above that aiging also qualifies to be considered as being part of development.

Also in southafrica it has been noted that due to the inaccessibility of adiquatehealthcare by children during the apartheid some children were  
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born with birth defects while others suffered from malnutrition and became disabled showing the different varying trajectories that human development can take (Youth hearings, 1997). Therefore the presence of multi-directionality as a life-p concept helps us to understand the various dimensions and directions taken by development throughout a person's life hence it earns its importance in understanding human development.

The life-p approach again plays a very important role in understanding human development when looking at the assumption that 'development is historically embedded' (Elder, 1998). This concept cannot be separated from the concept of contextualism hence Elder, (1998)'s work is to be viewed in light of the two concepts. According to Baites, (1987) the idea behind this assumption is that the historical location of a person together with the socio, economic and cultural experiences the individual encounter during that time has an impact on how he develops.

He went on to say that this assumption brings in history as an important factor that facilitates one's nature of development To support this assumption it was discovered that children who faced economic hardships during the time of the great depression looked far much older than their normal age but tended to recover when the conditions got better showing again that development is a continuous process (Elder, 1998). To further support this line of thinking it must be clarified that Elder, (1998) is stressing the fact that there is continuous interplay between factors such as history, timing of life transitions such as early pregnancy, shared relationships and a person's unique ability to exercise agency which has been defined by Baites, (1987) as plasticity These factors greatly influence the developmental

trajectories of a person (Sugarman, 1986). To support this he turns his attention to the oakland and berkely studies done on children who experiences the second world war, the greatdepressionand the korean war. As shown by this research children born during the economic meltdown of the great depression probably laked proper parenting and this affected maturation.

He went on to mention that children who lived during the second world war and the korean war had different experienes as compared to the oakland study and their developmental gains and losses were different. In southafrica research shows that black children who lived during the apatheid era ended up in sqatter camps without any aducation, with poor sanitation no recreation facilities and high health risks, this forced some to join ganges.

Removal from their land also caused identity confusion which is a very important developmental task according to Erikson. showing that historcal context brings with it a unique experience that individuals are exposed to and this has a great impact on one's developmet reaffirming the claim tht the life-p approach is important in understanding human development. It has also been brought to attention that the research methods used by life-p researchers are to some extent unreliable and may produce inaccurate information.

As critics of this approach have noted life-p researchers mainly use introspection, questioning and obsarvation for example Elder, (1998) on his study of children of the great depression admits that they would ask the subjects on how they thought the great depression influenced their lives,

Havighurst also used the same technique in his study of developmental tasks  
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and this is problematic since subjects are most likely unaware of their developmental tasks and deficits (Sugarman, 1986).

He went on to say researcher bias is also a problem for example theorists like Erikson may have been influenced to research by their background and the results they produce may bear similarities to what they personally feel, not the actual facts on the ground. Plasticity is another life-span concept that can help us understand human development. Though it has been mentioned above we now look at it in more detail. According to (Li & Freund, 2005) it is the capacity of the individual to influence his own development meaning a person may consciously or unconsciously influence their own development. Biological research on cortical plasticity across the life-span by (Li & Freund, 2005) has shown that the brain of adults can change its structural and functional organisation due to its developmental history. The research also showed the reorganisation of functions of the cortex in old age such as the use of both hemispheres to compensate for decline and this shows the importance of plasticity in human development.

The last characteristic of the life-span approach to be discussed is the fact that human development is multi-disciplinary meaning that it encompasses other fields such as biology, sociology and anthropology (Baltes, 1987). This assumption is further supported by Huvighurst (1972) who also suggest that developmental tasks arise from ' physical maturation, cultural pressure and individual aspirations (Sugarman, 1986).

He gives the example that learning to read may be as a result cultural influence, one's willingness to read and your mental or cognitive capability hence these three fields may simultaneously influence development. Though <https://assignbuster.com/is-the-life-span-approach-essential-to-human-development/>

this essay aims to assert the importance of the life-span approach to development. We cannot turn a blind eye on some of the weaknesses and criticisms brought forward against this approach. Therefore, we will start with the last concept which stated that human development is multidisciplinary.

Scholars like Sugarman, (1986) have argued that much of the work presented to support the assumption remains in doubt since research done in German society may not be applicable on a South African context and therefore this particular concept does not fully explain human development of all people across the world since developmental tasks such as choosing a job are culture specific (Havighurst, 1972).

Another criticism of the life-span approach is that some of its ideas are in contradiction with its principles. For example, Sugarman, (1986) notes that life-span developmental theorists offer a road map of development, Erikson's eight stages and Havighurst's assumption that failure to overcome a particular stage would result in unhappiness. This is in direct contradiction to the notion that development is multi-directional and does not follow a particular pattern of development which begs the question as to whether this approach is really essential in understanding human development.

After closely examining the assumptions of the life-span approach and the arguments presented against it, it is evident that the approach has a lot of inconsistencies and that the research methods used to some extent are inconclusive. After acknowledging these facts, it is however important to note that not all of the life-span approach's research is obtained by questionable

means and that it is the only theory of human development which better explains human development in South Africa.

The life-span approach is also to be credited for being the only theory of human development which is multi-disciplinary and it is also not deterministic in that there is always hope to overcome life's challenges. Also its methods are easily applicable therefore in conclusion it remains beyond reasonable doubt that development is a life-long process and that the life-span approach is vital in understanding human development. ?

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