

Research paper on theoretical approaches to child development

[Science](#), [Biology](#)



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Introduction

The study of child development concerns several elements that enable a child to become less dependent on his parents and guardians as time progresses. Experts consider the process of growing up first in holding various discussions on child development. Several theories on child development attempt to explain several possible factors that influence a child to advance towards full autonomy. Without disputing one another, child development theories help provide insights to experts on explaining certain issues related to the development of a child, including elucidations on developmental shortcomings that carry on towards adulthood.

This study presents descriptive and comparative accounts on the different theoretical approaches on child development. Four major perspectives form the entirety of this study: biological, behavioral, cognitivist and socio-cultural. The foregoing perspectives contribute to explaining how a child develops towards adulthood through the convergence and divergence of ideas concerning operations and structures within the body (biological), social influences (behavioral and socio-cultural) and mental processes (cognitivist). Comparisons between perspectives illustrate the dynamic nature of child development, albeit without the establishment of one perspective being prominent than the others due to the largely theoretical nature of the discipline.

Description of Theoretical Approaches

Biological Perspective

Attributing the development of a child through biological processes stems not only from processes present within the child, but also from that of genetic inheritance. In other words, child development could find explanations from bodily process influenced by internal and external forces. Evolutionists led by Charles Darwin noted that the development of a child depends on the traits he inherits from his parents, taking into consideration the notion of gene frequency of human generations. Since Darwin posited in his evolutionary theory that ape-like creatures served as the ancestors of present-day humans, its application in studying child development provides a compelling foundation to the biological perspective of the discipline. That a human acquires traits from his ancestors imprinted in genes and start

manifesting it from childhood to adulthood forms as the thesis of the evolutionary view of the biological perspective of child development. Verily, biological changes also demand the formation of new behavior from a child as a form of conditioning (Granger and Kivlighan, 2003; Horowitz, 1987).

Behavioral Perspective

Understanding child development through the behavioral perspective involves various environmental stimuli that affect the behavior of a child. Upbringing, in this case, stands as an important facet of looking at a development of a child through his behavior. Laboratory tests on organisms conducted by chief proponents John Broadus Watson and B. F. Skinner have shown that behavioral conditioning could affect development, thereby extending that finding on child development. Results have shown that a child tends to develop certain kinds of behavior subject to the presence of particular factors. Watson and Skinner have laid out the concept of contingency in formidable formation of relationships between the child and his parents and guardians. Additionally, conditioning also emanates particular effects coming from changes inflicted by motor progression, socialization and cognitive behavior. Within those cases, biological processes have profound effects on the behavior of the child as he develops new knowledge and skills in progressing towards adulthood (Granger and Kivlighan, 2003; Karpov, 2006).

Cognitivist Perspective

Several child development experts under the cognitivist perspective owe the proliferation of their field to the works of Jean Piaget, whose profound

background in epistemology has led him to conduct experiments on the intellectual processes of children. With that, Piaget formed his four stages of cognitive development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete-operational and formal-operational. The sensorimotor stage falls during the first seven to nine months of a child, in which the development of object permanence or the recognition that a particular object exists even if it is out of sight emerges. The preoperational stage comes next and lasts up until the seventh year of the child. Under that stage, the child begins to learn how to identify and associate with symbols, although he has yet to operationalize it on advanced forms of cognitive processes such as solving mathematical problems. The concrete-operational stage begins after the preoperational stage (usually between seven to 12 years old), in which the child begins to learn using cognitive processes through applying combinations of symbols he has learned during the preoperational stage in the event particular situations arise. Finally, the formal-operational stage begins once the child becomes adept at solving problems and issues cognitively, in which he begins to realize reasons behind the behavior of other people alongside the formation of their personalities (Bruner, 1997; Duncan, 1995; Glassman, 1995).

Socio-Cultural Perspective

Russian scholar Lev Vygotsky developed the socio-cultural perspective of child development based on the works of Piaget, who has greatly inspired him and his own works. Vygotsky believed that child development proceeds when a child gains the opportunity to deal with experiences in a hands-on

manner, which is a view derived from that postulated by Piaget. Yet, unlike, Piaget, Vygotsky did not regard the four stages of cognitive development the former has established as doctrinal. What Vygotsky did was tantamount to theorizing that appropriate intervention coming from adults (parents and guardians) could enable a child to learn new tasks, provided he is within the “ zone of proximal development” whenever he is about to become open to new learning opportunities. In other words, Vygotsky does not regard the timeframes of child development Piaget has developed. Rather, Vygotsky believes that a combination of proper and timely involvement of adults on the learning process of a child enables the latter to gain new knowledge on certain skills and applications (Bruner, 1997; Duncan, 1995; Glassman, 1995).

Comparisons of Theoretical Approaches

Cognitivist vs. Socio-Cultural

Piaget regards the four stages of cognitive development he has developed as part of his theory on child development. Through engagement in various experiments analyzing the changes in the development trends of a child, Piaget noted the constructive nature of the discipline through a building block-like manner. In other words, Piaget has noted that cognitive development has to push through with the development of each stage in succession in order to lead the child towards full development. It would seem as if that Piaget has attempted to naturalize the cognitive development of the child. Piaget has set age ranges defining the kind of cognitive abilities the child is most receptive to, with his numerous experiments serving as

basis for his claims. Development characterizes the advancement of the child to the next stage. Piaget notes that advancement to further stages would happen only if the child has completely grasped the sense of the lower stages (Bruner, 1997; Duncan, 1995; Glassman, 1995).

On the other hand, Vygotsky has asserted an interventionist approach to child development, despite finding himself in agreement with the central thesis presented by Piaget on hands-on development. Vygotsky prefers replacing the structural four-stage cognitive development format presented by Piaget with his notion that proper timing of interfering actions coming from adults would enable the a child to gain new knowledge and skills. With that, Vygotsky regards the importance of culture in child development, noting that facets such as traditions and customs could form part of the consciousness of the child as he grows up, followed by logical progression, voluntariness and concept formation. Adults who interfere in a timely manner in the learning process of the child are duly influences by the culture binding them, thus entailing a spillover of influences on the child. The cultural aspect of child development thus comes in two phases: interpsychological (between relationships shared with other people) and intrapsychological (within the child) (Bruner, 1997; Duncan, 1995; Glassman, 1995).

Biological vs. Behavioral

Arnold Gesell, a noted scholar that tackled the biological perspective of child development, followed from the works of Darwin and other prominent evolutionists to present his view on the matter. The maturational theory,

Gesell has noted, focuses on the role of genetics in programming a human being starting from childhood in developing his traits towards adulthood. Gesell emphasized the point of Darwin that traits pass on genetically to succeeding generations, but added that the development of a child in both the biological and psychological aspects depend on the environment that nurtures him. Genetics play a key role under the concept espoused by Gesell, noting that the body of a child has acquired by default the genetic traits necessary to lead him towards maturity. Environmental influences, while cited by Gesell as having great significance, is only secondary to his analysis of child development, given that such could only impose impacts if the environment itself is compelling enough for children to develop other behavioral facets, most notably through infliction of abusive actions and distressing situations. Parents, according to Gesell, are not highly influential for leading a child towards maturity, since genes have defaulted into him the traits he would manifest as he progresses towards adulthood (Horowitz, 1987).

On the other hand, the behavioral thesis of child development differs from that of the biological perspective, although the latter may find considerable application in some key aspects. Behaviorism considers factors such as contingency, motor progression, socialization and cognitive behavior. Outputs of Watson and Skinner have shown that a child tends to form harmonious relationships with his parents and guardians if contingency is highly valued, while the reverse may lead to erroneous growth characterized by depression. For motor progression, it is clear that as a child grows to develop his reflexes he begins to gain conditioning to improve his motor

skills. It is in this case where biological changes impose great relevance in that such provides the child the urge to develop his reflexes towards motor development. Socialization involves multifaceted processes involving the influence of other people. As a child begins interacting with other children, he develops mechanisms on dealing with them in the aspects of verbal communication, self-development and social behavior. By socializing, a child learns how to move within and interpret society, leading him to become more adept in terms of mingling with other people. Cognitive behavior involves the operation of mental processes as a child undergoes learning progressions. Despite heavy behavioral underpinnings, cognitive behavior renders a separate yet related viewpoint in the study of child development (Granger and Kivlighan, 2003; Horowitz, 1987; Karpov, 2006).

Conclusion

A closer look at the descriptive accounts and comparisons above shows that all four theoretical approaches converge and diverge with one another in several ways. The emanation of impacts coming from both within and without a child leads to his development, as explained by the four perspectives. Biological changes have the conditioning power that leads the child to develop new sets of behaviors. The behavior of other people around the child influences him to form particular traits alongside those present within the genes. Cognitive development also entrenches on the behavioral aspect of child development, in that the thinking processes conducted by the child may lead him to apply and develop certain kinds of behavior as he learns new things. Culture, understood as an institutionalized collectivity of

behaviors within given societies, also affects the child externally through the manifestations he receives from the care of his parents and guardians.

Overall, the multifaceted nature of child development is perfectly acceptable and well institutionalized; that the absence of any of the established theoretical perspectives may render the child development puzzle incomplete and new theoretical perspectives may contribute constructively to existing ones.

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