

# Effect of childhood experience on adult personality and behaviour



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## Effect of Childhood Experience on Adult Personality and Behaviour

Title: To what extent is our adult personality shaped by childhood experiences by comparing the behavioural and psychodynamic approach.

There are different development stages in which every human being transit through once they are born into the world. These stages are birth, infancy, childhood followed by adolescence, adulthood and late adulthood (Louv 1998). Different psychologist believe that childhood experiences plays a key influence on adult personality and behaviour. Neglect, poor relationships with family, lack of parental care and support and family norms all contribute as early experiences that shapes adult personality, behaviour and health consequences. However, the assumption used in explaining the relationship between early experience and behaviour varies according to different psychological approaches. This essay focuses on the psychological perspectives of health. It will explore the idea regarding the extent of how childhood experiences shape personality in later life. Moreover, psychological approaches such as behavioural, psychodynamic and social learning theory will be distinguished and compared in relation to how a behaviour is learnt. Nevertheless, two health models will be discussed to influence these behaviours.

In order to reach the main aim of this essay, it is thus necessary to explain what personality is. Personality itself is defined as interpersonal processes that determines feelings, thoughts and behaviour (Burger 2018). However, it means different things to different psychologist. According to Sigmund Freud, personality is a pattern of complexes which are influenced by the

ways in which people carry the end results of their childhood experiences in the mind (. Social learning psychologist instead reject any concept of personality as they focus on scientific directed observable changes in behaviours that are determined by individuals experience in the environment. (Glassman and Hadad 2013). The behaviourism approach posit that behaviours can be solely learnt externally via operant and classical conditioning (Mazur 2015). B. F Skinner as the pioneer of the operant conditioning suggested that these behaviours can be shaped by positive and negative consequences meaning the probability that a behaviour will be repeated or not (Martin and Fabes 2008). Pritchard (2005) specified that providing a child with a reward such as a sweet as a result of a good behaviour would more likely encourage the child to repeat thus desired behaviour again. In regard to this approach, many parents adopted it as a principle to shape children's behaviour through food reward . However, Birch et al (1980) clarified that the use of food as a reward adopted by parents in shaping behaviour such as " if you behave well, you can have a chocolate" can have consequences on children in later life. Puhl and Schwartz (2003) conducted a study in which they found that majority of adults with eating disorders such as binge eating, and dietary restraint reported their recollection of their parents using food to control certain behaviour in their childhood. Ivan Pavlov as the founder of operant conditioning clarified that behaviour can also be acquired via an association of a previous experience between two stimuli namely conditioned and unconditioned (Mcsweeney and Murphy 2014). For example, abnormal behaviour such as phobia can be acquired through classical conditioning. For instance, when a dog considered as a neutral stimulus (something that does not cause fear)

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associates with unconditioned stimuli such as (biting) may develop into fear and result a condition response to result. An example, may occur in a situation whereby a child who witnesses a dog biting a close member, might grow up having phobias of dog throughout his or her life.

Though the social learning theory proposes that actions are acquired in the environment however it clarifies that the social interaction and situation in which people may find themselves present can lead a behaviour to be learnt (reference). The development of thus learning may result through three main processes: observation, imitation and modelling unlike the psychodynamic approach. Kobus (2013) stated that many health risks such as drugs and smoking are often influenced by an individual's relationships with friends and families particularly during the childhood and adolescent stage. During adolescent stage young teenagers begun to demonstrate hormonal changes throughout their body and as a result may try to discover their identity.

Therefore, if any negative experiences pertaining from infancy to childhood are not resolved such as failure of parental guidance- this may lead a child astray by joining bad groups which in return subsequently determine their personality and behaviour (Wise 2000). He concluded by pointing out that during this stage oedipal desires may result over again in the unconscious part of the mind influence the adolescent to depart from families to peers. Li and Guo (2016) specified that frequent and close interaction with smoker friends may turn a non -smoker into a smoker. A typical example may occur in a situation whereby a child in his /her early teenage years classified as a non -smoker but however who have a collaboration with a group of smokers, would more likely to learn how to smoke as way to fit in the group

and therefore prevent being bullied. The teenage child may therefore become a regular smoker in their adulthood with the failure of protection and counselling from parents. Numerous studies have found that there is a huge relationship between adolescent smoking and peer influence. " In a study 10% of children who became regularly smokers showed signs of nicotine dependence with two days of first inhaling from a cigarette and 25 within a month. Within a year of starting to smoke, it has been reported that children will be inhaling the same amount of nicotine in adults and have difficulty to stop". Krohn et al. (1985) argued that though there are few empirical researches regarding the relationship between family influence and substance use unlike peer influence, however, he clarified that a child who sees a parent as a role model smoking would more likely to imitate thus behaviour in their adulthood. However, role model is not solely that factor that would determine how a child behave in the future. Darling and Cumisille (2003) pointed out that a child brought up in a family observing both parents smoking is more likely to obtain knowledge on the rudiments of smoking such as lighting cigarette and therefore enact the learnt behaviour and thereby practice it in later life.

On the other hand, the psychodynamic approach advocates on internal processes and childhood experiences in shaping personality and thereby behaviour rather than the environment as the behaviourism and social learning theory confirm (Santrock 2005). Freud assumed that all human action is motivated by the need to satisfy basic drives and that these drives changes overtime (Glassman 2000). " *The objects which are the focus of gratification change, and so the does the mode of gratification -that is the*

*area of the body which is the centre of for gratification”* (Glassman, p. 214).

An aspect of Freud’s psychosexual model of development contended that there are five developmental stages that occurs throughout life, but the first four that appears in childhood can have effect on personality (Glassman 2000). These stages are relatively known as the oral, anal, sexual, phallic, latency and genital stages. For instance, in terms of understanding how smoking are influenced by experience in childhood, it is thus necessary to explain the first stage of the psychosexual development. During the first stage of development known as oral stage, Sigmund Freud uttered that focus of gratification is mainly on the mouth. Therefore, he specified that during this stage if a six-month nursing baby ‘ s appetite was dissatisfied at any point of the libidinal stage, anxiety would transform into a mental health disorder known as neurosis in adulthood. Therefore, an infantile oral fixation would manifest as an obsession of oral stimulation. This oral fixation can manifest itself as a need for oral gratification such as smoking. Though the psychosexual development is an effective model of understanding smoking behaviour however it lacks ecological validity as there it cannot be scientifically justified that prolonged breast feeding might not lead to an individual adopting addictive behaviour in later adulthood.

Despite the differences of the behaviourism and psychodynamic approach, however the both assume that traumatic events can have effect on the overall wellbeing on child throughout their life. They perceive that human beings develop attachment for people that satisfies their needs (Stroebe 1987). Thus, attachment plays a key role in children’life. Hammen (1998) pointed out that if a child does not experience normal parent and child bond

during their childhood such as being love, valued and accepted, they may develop in maladaptive ways. Lewinsohn (1974) emphasized that depression occurs when there is a decrease in the amount of response-contingent positive reinforcement in the environment. Therefore, for instance a child who loses a parent in an accident and goes into foster care might develop depression. Moreover, Bowlby (1981) argued that not merely does the loss of a love or lack of early childhood attachment induce into depression but can have implications on the child's personality and affect their functioning in adulthood. He focused on the importance of early attachment bond by stating that every " infant have an innate and fundamental tendency to form attachments bonds to a primary care taker, in the service of protection, survival and healthy development" (p. 104). Therefore, he argued that a child with an open, kind and supportive care taker parent would grow up using thus relationship as a basis to form a good social network with people and adopt necessary skills in lift in order to overcome difficult situations such as depression unlike those with aversive experiences such loss of a loved one or death. Therefore, prior to the example concerning a child developing depression as result of a love one, this might also have impact on their social life such as feeling sad and isolated whiles growing up particularly when they see other kids with their parents having fun. A study by Candy (2018) found that the number of people diagnosed with depression was both higher for children and adults compared to other mental disorders such as dysthymia. For those with early onset depression there were 234 compared to 74 for dysthymia and for adults there 155 compared to 26 with dysthymia. Among those with early

and late onset depression the results confirmed that they more often experience abuse in their childhood

Both the social learning theory, psychodynamic and have criticisms. Though the behaviourism utilized experimental methods to explain the cause and effect of behaviours, however it has been argued by other researchers as too deterministic. This is mainly because it does not take into consideration the concept of free will meaning that people can choose to behave in a certain way based on their thoughts and feelings of a certain situation and not necessarily due to their early experiences in the environment. For instance, eating disorders may result due to individual's choices instead of instrumental rules used by parents in childhood experiences. Research studies found that the purpose why some individual smoke as because they viewed it as cool rather than being learnt from others. Moreover, it focuses solely on nurture as the main predictor of human behaviour rather than nature. For instance, it ignores the fact that genetic factors also could determine the way an individual behave in the case of phobia. Nevertheless, biological theorist debated that the social learning theory is lacks ecological validity as it ignores learning differences as everyone is different. For example, whiles a child might learn a behaviour due to peer influence or observing a parent smoke, another child might respond totally differently and not model thus behaviour in their adulthood. Though the behaviourism and psychoanalytic theory provide a clear explanation on the importance of attachment, however it is not always true that depression may induce as a reduction of a positive reinforcement as some children may respond totally different after the death of a love one. Despite the overall criticisms of the



approaches, health psychologist apply different models to prevent diseases and improve health through different health models. For instance the health promotion model

## References

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