

Theories on early childhood social development



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The purpose of this paper is to give the reader some understanding of the issues that affect the social development of a human, specifically those that may be present during the early stages of childhood.

This paper will explain the meaning of some key terms used within the field and discuss two prominent theories.

Attachment

According to Schaffer (1996) an attachment is "... a long-enduring, emotionally meaningful tie to a particular individual. The object of the attachment is generally someone (most often a parent) who returns the child's feelings, creating a tie that can be extremely powerful and emotionally laden in both directions". Schaffer also believes that there are four phases of attachment and that the earliest phases of attachment act as a model for later attachments.

The general consensus within psychology finds that the underlying reason infants form attachments is in order to gain security whilst they grow and to ensure that their basic needs are met, such as warmth, food provision and safety. Some theorists suggest that the most important attachment is with a parent, namely the primary caregiver; however developmental psychologists have investigated whether this important bond can be ascertained via siblings, such as in the case of the Kolochova Twins (Gross 1999, pg. 568).

Nature/Nurture

The nature/nurture debate is a key cornerstone of psychological research and theory, with the question being asked as to whether humans are born with certain perceptual capacities that are further developed after birth (nature) or whether humans are born as a blank slate (or Tabula rasa) and gain all their abilities through their surroundings as they develop (nurture).

Those who take the nature view are known as nativists. Although many theorists take the nativist view a good example of a current proponent of the belief would be Noam Chomsky, a noted linguist, who has based his theories concerning linguistics on the premise that all humans are born with an innate ability to understand and develop language skills using what he termed the Language Acquisition Device (LAD), a theoretical organ within the brain (D'Agostino, 1986).

Those who take the nurture view are known as empiricists. As with the nativism there are many theorists who have based their work on this line of thinking and to use a relevant example a prominent empiricist, who developed theories that countered those held by Chomsky, is Jerome Bruner. The counter theory raised in response to Chomsky's LAD was that of a Language Acquisition Support System (LASS), this being the network of individuals who interact with an infant, allowing it to learn language skills from them (Bruner 1983).

The purely nativist or empiricist approaches though tend to be considered by many within the field of psychology as being overly-simplistic opinions, rooted in the early history of psychological debate when a more philosophical rather than scientific approach was taken. Many modern day

psychologists consider themselves interactionists, viewing aspects relating to both the traditional nativist and empiricist as having worth in debate but not being mutually exclusive of each other.

So how does the nature/nurture debate relate to the development of social capacities of infants? Well is the means of interacting with other humans, such as smiling for example, genetic or learnt behaviour?

The nature (nativist) opinion would be that infants are born with the engrained knowledge that smiling is a positive form of expression and that by using this ability they can manipulate the world around them in order to gain their basic needs and wants. A nurture (empiricist) opinion though would be that infants learn that smiling is a positive form of expression as a result of those around them smiling when presenting the infant with experiences it finds comforting or on receipt of basic needs. This associative learning (the understanding that one thing leads to another) was the basis by which Ivan Pavlov developed his theory of classical conditioning.

In order to better understand the nature/nurture debate and its effect on theories relating to the development of infant attachments to parents or surrogates we will now describe, evaluate and compare two leading theories within the field.

Bowlby's Monotropic Theory (1951)

John Bowlby's Monotropic Theory is a theory that argues infants have an innate (evolutionary) need to form an attachment to one specific figure, usually the mother. He based much of thinking on the previous work of

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Konrad Lorenz, specifically Lorenz 1935 study into imprinting using newly-born ducklings and goslings (Sylva and Lunt, 2001, pg. 29).

Bowlby's theory states that this attachment to one specific figure is initially driven by a survival instinct, both within the infant for self-preservation but also within the mother to act as a protector and provider to the vulnerable infant. The attachment forms from birth to 2 ½ years which he referred to as the 'critical period'. Bowlby likens this attachment to a thermostat, keeping the infant at a steady state, by this he means keeping the infant close to the mother. This state is maintained through a number of 'social releasers', means by which the infant can show pleasure or displeasure for a particular circumstance, such as crying when the mother is absent or smiling when given comfort.

According to Bowlby, "Mother love in infancy is as important for mental health as vitamins and proteins for physical health" (Gross and Rolls, 2008).

Failure to form an attachment with the caregiver during this period would lead to the inability to form attachments in later life as they have not formed an internal working model. Bowlby also went on to state that the individuals develop anti-social behaviour, poor educational development and the inability to remain in gainful employment. This is termed the 'Maternal Deprivation Hypothesis'.

Evaluation of Bowlby's Monotropic Theory (1951)

When considering Bowlby's theory it is worth bearing in mind the time of its development. Bowlby was very much a man of his time and had his own

opinions on the role of women within society. Also his initial studies were funded by organisations that were keen to see women return to traditional roles (of housewife and mother), freeing up employment opportunities for servicemen who had returned from service in WW2. His pre-conceived opinions and the possible outcome-driven bias concerning its funding could be argued bring into doubt the impartiality of the study.

Infants display a variety of attachment behaviours towards attachment figures other than the mother. A study by Michael Rutter in 1981 showed that the social releasers Bowlby speaks of as being critical in the maintenance of attachment between mother and infant are also displayed with peers, fathers, siblings and even inanimate objects (as also reinforced by Harlow and Zimmerman's 'cloth monkey' study) (Gross, 1999, pg. 558).

Although Bowlby never stated infants couldn't form multiple attachments his theory suggests such multiple attachments are the exception rather than the rule, a view countered by a later study from Schaffer and Emerson in 1964 (which will be discussed in greater depth later).

Bowlby suggests that fathers have little direct emotional connection to an infant and that the father's role is purely to support the mother. Schaffer and Emerson's research though for their 1964 study though once again countered this claim, showing that fathers can be attachment figures in their own right.

References

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