

Normative development essay



In the latter part of the 19th century, psychology began to separate from its previous philosophical standing, emerging more as a scientific discipline. Abstract laws were devised, and objective and quantitative measurements of isolated variables analysed. Theories of development emerged and have continued throughout history, providing organization, and “ a lens through which researchers can interpret and explain any number of specific facts or observations” (Sigelman & Rider, 2012, p. 32).

In postulating what is seen as ‘ normative’ development, these theories provide a model or map from which science and society are largely influenced. Normative development implies an individual will grow, experience and behave in a similar manner to the general population throughout life (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). It infers a degree of commonality between humans, and of a comparable progression through a lifespan. Given all individuals experience life differently, the concept of normative development is arguable.

In this paper, the author will examine a number of developmental theories substantiating the claim that normative development can exist. It will be argued however, that this claim is supported best when seen through the integration of a number of models, rather than one model in isolation. Norms should also be applied over a range rather than set circumstance, and seen as evolving, rather than unchanging. Prior to examining what may be considered normative development, it is first necessary to examine the notion of ‘ normal’.

Definitions of normal are diverse, but commonly include the notion of conforming to typical standards or regulations (Merriam-Webster, n. d.). That being so, what is typical? And who determines standards or regulations? In reality, normal is a social construct that fits into a time frame; there is no definitive answer to what is normal, or even abnormal. Sigelman & Rider (2012) highlight the difficulties in drawing a line between the two terms developmentally, suggesting the conception of what is considered normal or abnormal is gauged through statistical data, maladaptiveness and personal distress.

Historically, the gravity of the concept has moved. What was previously considered abnormal is today understood as a disorder, or perhaps simply a unique perspective. Given this shift in clarity, Kramer (2009) suggests redefining normal “ to include broad ranges of difference” (p. 3). Peterson (2010) suggests that whilst some developmental changes over a lifespan are individual and random, others are predictable and can be forecast with reasonable accuracy. What is described as normative, or normal and healthy development makes use of predictable transitions and challenges that humans face over a lifespan.

Normative development is therefore seen as a universally generalizable change, or as “ what ought to be” (Smith & Voneche, 2006. p. 3). In consideration of suggestions proposed by Smith & Voneche (2006) and Kramer (2009), normative development could be more appropriately explained as what ought to be, over a broad range of differences.

Development is defined as “ systematic changes and continuities in the individual that occur between conception and death” (Sigelman & Rider, <https://assignbuster.com/normative-development-essay/>

2012. p. 2). Changes are permanent, qualitative, generalizable and work to progressively improve an individual's performance.

A developmental theory attempts to explain the mechanism of change over time in the milieu of physical, psychological, cognitive, behavioural or social dimensions. Miller (2011) suggests “ a theory gives meaning to facts, provides a framework for facts, assigns more importance to some facts than others, and integrates existing facts” (p. 11). Whilst some theories are very specific and time limited, others endeavour to explain developmental change integrating several core fields across the lifespan. Peterson (2010) highlights theories as explaining developmental changes applying to most people, most of the time.

While differing in approach, theories provide valuable information regarding healthy development, used to assist understanding of growth and change throughout human existence. Possibly the two things that are constantly normal in human existence are birth and death. What happens in between is very much a complicated affair. Sigelman & Rider (2012) identify three broad domains of development: physical, cognitive and psychosocial. Of these three domains, parameters for physical growth are the most accurate predictor of normative data.

All humans have endocrine and neural systems, which are essentially involved in growth, maturation, ageing and functioning over the lifespan (Sigelman & Rider 2012). These systems typically identify that an individual will progress from infancy to adulthood through a number of maturational stages. Whilst genetic endowment and environmental factors do influence

physical growth, it remains possible to forecast with relative accuracy that certain physical milestones will be achieved at a certain age. Purely through knowledge that the gross, or large muscle group motor development precedes fine motor development for instance, it is possible to predict when a child may be expected to roll over, crawl or walk; similarly when it is realistic to be able to expect a child to manage finer skills such as those involved with holding a pencil or doing up buttons (Brotherson, 2006). The interaction that occurs between physical, social and cognitive development determines that a normative model designed on physical data alone however, will be very limited.

Whereas physical development slows as life progresses, the same cannot be said for psychological development (Rutter & Rutter, 1993). The revolutionary thinking of Sigmund Freud and his psychoanalytic approach of the early 1900's challenged existing human nature and development and inspired offshoot theories that continue to be applicable to healthy development in modern day society. Bandura's social cognitive theory, for example, was devised in response to Freud's philosophy regarding the conscience (Peterson, 2010). Bandura's theory asserts that individuals will behave similarly across the lifespan through modelling or imitation.

This behaviourist based theory explains human behaviour in terms of a reciprocal interaction between cognitive, behavioural and environmental factors (Sharf, 2012). In observing other people, the learner pays attention to and perceives the other model, constructs and remembers the behaviour, and retrieves and reproduces this behaviour subsequently, dependent on motivating factors (Archer & McCarthy 2007). An individual is said to be

motivated internally, as in achieving a personal goal, or vicariously, when the learner observes the consequences of the behaviour in the model.

In his parameters for healthy development, Bandura gives no credibility to collective stages, rather offers the process as being gradual and continuous in a generation of learning (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). Principles of learning can be seen to operate throughout life, and can be used to describe and understand behaviour at any age, giving weight to Archer & McCarthy's (2007) assertion that this theory is universal and can be applied cross-culturally. Contemporary settings that effectively incorporate this philosophy are demonstrated in media and marketing programmes, positive parenting models, and cognitive behavioural therapies.

Similarly, in the educational system, teachers can be seen to model both material objectives and moral standing to students. The reciprocal interaction of environment, behaviour and cognition, explains differences that are seen in children of the same or similar age, who develop in vastly different environments or cultures. In providing data verified through testing and application, social cognitive theory illustrates the existence of predictability in behaviour cross-culturally, thereby supporting the existence of normative development.

Despite these findings however, Bandura is seen to discount biological elements such as genetics and maturation as influential on growth. Unconscious influence of emotions, and creativity in an individual are also ignored. These limitations prevent this theory from providing a normative developmental framework in isolation. Following criticism of strict

behaviourist models from the 1950's and 1960's, Piaget postulated a more thought-based approach to development in the 1970's. Piaget's cognitive development theory encompasses the concept of constructivism (Sigelman & Rider, 2012).

Intelligence is seen as a process to aid an individual to adapt to an environment. Piaget argued that in exploring and making sense from environment, a child develops increasingly complex and comprehensive ways of thinking. Development takes place over four invariant stages, with each stage characterised by a “ qualitative different mode of thought” (Peterson, 2010, p. 53). Transition between stages is seen as a dialectical conflict between accommodation and assimilation of information.

Assimilation involves bringing new information into the environment and fitting it into pre-existing structures or schemas. Accommodation refers to the changes that are made if the new information does not fit into existing structures. Van Greet (1998) writes of assimilation as conservative, in that it consolidates the current state of intellectual functioning. Accommodation is therefore seen as the prime source of change in an individual. Piaget's theory demonstrated “ from birth onwards, intellectual competencies undergo continuous development until they attain their adult forms” (Beilin, 1992, p. 202).

Many modern theorists continue to accept Piaget's notion of thinking changing in qualitative ways over time, of a child being active in their own environment and of the interaction of nature and nurture. Education for example, embraces the concept of assimilation and accommodation by

pitching programmes to a child's level of understanding, and in the provision of an environment that simultaneously supports and stimulates adaptation and growth. Whilst Piaget recognized individual differences in progression through stages of cognitive development, critics argue however, that such development is domain specific.

A child growing up in the country for example, may test in an urban environment as less advanced. Similarly, a child may test poorly in mathematics, but strongly in language. The deficit may simply be due to familiarity and experience. In addition, debate exists regarding whether or not all individuals do progress to a final, or formal operations stage of cognition (Kuhn, 2008). Considering this information, it is evident that akin to Bandura's theory, Piaget provides substantiated data for proposed normative development but the omission of key factors prevent the theory being used singularly.

Urie Bronfenbrenner developed a bio-ecological theory of development in response to what he saw as an omission of social, cultural and individual differences in existing developmental theories. Underlying this theory is that genetic material interacts with environmental experience to determine developmental outcome (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Bronfenbrenner's model is described as a " person-in-context" (Miller, 2002. p. 202.) in that it describes individual development in everyday contexts.

An individual, along with his or her genetic makeup, biological and psychological characteristics is " embedded in a series of environmental systems" (Sigelman & Rider, 2012, p. 9). Four levels of context are

described, ranging from microsystem to macrosystem, incorporating relationships and influences closest to and furthest from a child respectively. A fifth system, or chronosystem, adds a third dimension. In the chronosystem, Bronfenbrenner (1994) includes the notion of time in the characteristic of the individual, but also in the context of changes in environment over a life course.

Systems expand, interact and embrace the influences of an individual's life, with changes or conflict in one system have a rippling effect on other systems. This theory highlights the influence of human relationships on development, identifying pathways as complex, unique and often unpredictable (Brendtro, 2006). In relation to Bronfenbrenner's contribution, Miller (2002) writes: " By including sociology, anthropology, economics, and political science in these contexts, he built bridges between psychology and these disciplines" (p. 205).

In considering a multi-directional and multi-faceted approach to development, systems theories address the necessity of any model to consider a range of variables as influential on development. Whilst applauded for this integrative approach however, bio-ecological theory is criticised for being unable to provide a clear picture of development. In asserting that development is unpredictable and can take a variety of paths based on a variety of factors, in a variety of environments, it is impossible for this theory to provide generalizations for normative development.

Bandura, Piaget and Bronfenbrenner establish the existence of predictable transitions and challenges within a human lifespan however also illustrate

understanding of human development as changing markedly over time. Historically, as science has attempted to quantify development, emphasis has shifted from Freud's psychoanalytic personality model, to behaviourist theories, followed by more cognitive and systemic, humanistic models. Each theory builds on another, in an effort to encompass more and more aspects of the developmental phenomenon.

As theories evolve, so does the perception of normal, healthy development. Theorists today recognise that humans are influenced by both nature and nurture and that potential to develop in both good and bad directions is present universally. Furthermore, development is seen as continuous and discontinuous, active and passive, and has both universal and individual aspects (Sigelman & Rider, 2012). Accompanying this increasingly complex analytic process is an evolutionary change in the perception of the notion of normality.

In data presented merely ten years ago, Wrosch & Freund (2001) label challenges in an individual's life as normative and non-normative, including family and career as normative, and divorce or early retirement as non-normative. Western society today accepts divorce or early retirement more readily as normative, with futuristic predictions even more prospective. Similarly, age has different connotations historically and culturally, and will continue to change futuristically (Sigelman & Rider, 2012; Alreck, 2000).

With the identification of the vast range of influential factors, contemporary society is less accepting of the concept normative development and sees the notion as somewhat flawed. Many argue that it simply cannot exist.

Notwithstanding this current, questioning stance, considerable evidence continues to survive, asserting that developmental norms can exist, and do influence present day society. Human beings develop values and morals, pursue goals, make judgements and draw conclusions in relation to what may be appropriate, necessary, or possible. This activity involves norms (Campbell, 2007).

Age norms such as “ the terrible two’s” or “ midlife crisis” for example, infer that certain behaviours can be expected at certain ages or lifetimes. Despite often being perceived as non-rational through failure to implicate practical statistics, social norms, or expectations of how to behave in a particular social setting exist similarly, often inter-related with age or developmental norms (Etzioni, 2000). Gender has particular connotations socially, demonstrated in women being accepted as more fragile and men more dominant particularly in eastern world countries.

In physical terms, expectations of growth and development is evidenced in the assumption of sexual maturation in adolescence. In today’s society, it is reasonable to assume that an opinion will be sought if a child does not grow out of the terrible twos, an adult has a prolonged midlife crisis, a female becomes overly aggressive or an adolescent fails to develop sexually.

Diagnosis brings relief and a plan for addressing the problem. Whether or not normative development can exist, these examples demonstrate it does exist, for if it did not, there would be no reason to investigate non-conformity and no comfort gained from diagnosis.

Smith & Voneche (2006) argue that norms are not facts, and concern what has to be done, or what has to be, rather than what is the case. This statement reads true, for all normative recommendations for development struggle with uncertainties and difficulties in interpretation and prediction. Kramer (2009) describes constraining normality as inducing conformity, and expanding it as inducing anxiety. Whilst these arguments have credibility, the over-riding factor remains. Without norms, there would be no framework. No generalizations or assumptions from which to structure success, failure, progression or regression.

Cultural, societal, socio-economic, religious, biological and many other factors do impact the concept, however in the absence of context, how can growth be measured? As Sigelman & Rider (2012) suggest: “ You simply cannot define abnormal behaviour and development without having a solid grasp of normal behaviour and development” (p. 521). As a small sample of many, Bandura, Piaget and Bronfenbrenner offer quite different theories, and different judgements as to what prescribes normal development. No single theory described in this paper can be seen to provide an accurate and complete picture for generalized development across culture, however current application of aspects of each theory affords credible evidence of viability. With this credibility comes the assertion that normative development can exist. Further to this, and despite claims to the contrary, normative development does exist, although definitive lines are often obscure. With the acceptance of a more flexible attitude to the concept of normal, and appreciation of global diversity and individuality, normative

development provides an invaluable framework which embraces history and nurtures future growth. References Alreck, P. L. (2000).

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