Theories used to explain human growth and development

This essay will discuss some of the theories used to explain human growth and development and discuss the pros and cons of each theory in relation to different life stages and show how each theory can be applied to social work practice.

The theories outlined in this essay include the debate over nature verses nurture; from its beginnings through to its progression into the study of growth and development and the practical implementations through the work of Freud, Erikson and Piaget. Each theory provides a different viewpoint from their stance on the nature verses nurture debate. This essay will also discuss the work carried out by Bowlby and demonstrate how his work has affected modern social work practice. Each theory will be examined, highlighting the benefits and limitations of the work undertaken and demonstrate in real terms how each theory can be applied when working alongside clients and carers in a social work setting.

The term " human growth and development" is used to explain the changes a person will undertake from cradle to grave. These changes include; physical, emotional, social and intelligence changes and will cover life events such as bereavement and loss. Through the discussion on each theory, this essay will demonstrate how both environmental and genetic factor influence the development of a child or adult and how life events can disrupt the normal development of a person.

Deviance from the normal course of development can cause crisis events in a person's life and it is because of these, social work intervention may be required. It is important for a social worker to understand how people

develop and comprehend how life events can impact a person's quality of life and their interaction with society. This can be done through the application of development and learning theories. It is also important to understand that each person is an individual and that past life events do not always have the negative outcomes as discussed with each theory.

In the Origin of the Species, Darwin (1859) set out his ubiquitous theory of genetics and how living things are influenced by genetic makeup rather than their environment. His book was the starting point for the controversial argument of nature verses nurture. This debate is one of the longest running in terms of human growth and development and is relatively simple. The theory puts forward an argument to try and explain one of the most common questions people ask of themselves, " What made us the way we are?" The two sides put forward compelling opinions to explain how people develop.

The Nature argument comes from the viewpoint that it is the genetic makeup of a person that dictates their personality and intelligence; the environment is merely a trigger for what is biologically destined. Genetic development assumes that a person cannot change their behaviour when faced with environmental influences. One of the more vocal subscribers to this theory was Freud.

Freud's Stages of Psychosexual Development detail the steps a person must go through in order to reach their full potential. Gross (2010) outlines the five distinct phases and how movement from one to the next is dependent, primarily, on physical factors. Each stage has a developmental task which, once attained, allows the child to progress. The stages run from birth until a

child passes through puberty, when they are said to have reached their full maturation or genetic development. Environmental factors are said to play a minimal part and should remain neutral during development, as extremes in any direction would be harmful and leave a child stuck in their current stage. External influences are described more as a trigger for development rather than the cause, Howe (1995).

Freud's theory was the basis of a number of other similar theories surrounding the Nature view point. Erikson. E (1959) believed that development did not stop once puberty had passed; rather that it was a continuing process throughout life. Each stage in the lifespan model of development requires a person " to pass through a genetically determined sequence of psychosocial stages" Gross (2010, p583) and in doing so will result in the acquisition of both a positive or negative personality trait and physical developments. An outline of each stage can be found in Walker and Crawford (2010) and is summarised below;

Birth to 1 year – Trust vs Mistrust – depending on the relationship and stability of care provided by the carer, a child will learn to trust. Where the standard of care is intermittent or poor, the child will become distrustful. A distrustful child may go on to become an anxious, insecure adult.

1 – 3 years – Autonomy vs Shame – during this stage a child becomes more physically independent. If a child does not receive positive feedback during this stage or is over controlled, it may develop a sense of shame at its inability to perform tasks.

3 – 6 years – Initiative vs Guilt – a child at this age is able to set goals and organise activities to attain these goals. A child can often be seen to make up games and use imagination to transform its surroundings. If a child is criticised or ridiculed during this stage, it may develop a strong sense of guilt which holds them back from showing any initiative.

6 – 12 years – Industry vs Inferiority – During the school years, a child will develop a sense of pride and achievement in their role. This will drive a child to set more and higher goals whilst feeling good about their successes. A child who is not encouraged will begin to feel inferior to its peers, doubting their own abilities.

Adolescence (13 – 18 years) – Identity vs Role Confusion – During this stage, a child will progress through puberty and must learn to adapt its existing self-image to one which is compatible to its new physical developments. Negative responses from society during this time can lead to a sense of confusion and leave them feeling unsure of how they fit in.

Young Adulthood (19 – 39 years) – Intimacy vs Isolation – throughout early adulthood, a person begins to develop more intimate relationships with people around them. A person who is unable to form these close relationships may become isolated and lead to feelings of depression.

Middle Adulthood (40 – 60 years) – Generativity vs Stagnation – By this time a person is usually well established in society. They may be focused on a career or raising a family. Failure to be successful in these areas may result in a person questioning their effectiveness in their role, feeling other people have overtaken them.

Late Adulthood (61+ years) – Ego Integrity vs Despair – People tend to slow down in their later years, reflecting on a successful life. If someone is dissatisfied with their achievements or feels that have missed opportunities they may become depressed.

Walker and Crawford (2010) examine all stages of Erikson's Theory. The fifth stage, adolescence, is when the desired outcome would be to develop a sense of identity. Successful transition through this stage would result in a young adult having a strong sense of self and the ability to set their own goals for the future and understand how they fit into society. During the adolescent stage, all children will go through puberty. This is a biological development stage which will occur regardless of environmental and social influences, providing the child is healthy. For girls more so than boys, this can be particularly problematic.

Many girls during puberty liken their changing body to that of older and younger girls and become dissatisfied with their own developing body. The media also portrays a dominant image of the " ideal body" to which many young girls compare themselves. This can lead to low self-esteem and problems such as self-harming.

Around 25, 000 young people are admitted into hospital each year as a result of self-harming according to Fox and Hawton (2004) as sites by Young Minds. An incident such as this may lead to the involvement of social services. Social work intervention at this crisis point may take the form of arranging and monitoring the attendance of self-help groups and/or medical care. The social worker would also be expected to work with both the young

person and family to find the root cause of the low self-esteem and self-harming.

It is imperative that the social worker is able to provide information and support on the causes of and ways to deal with self-harm. There should be an understanding and acknowledgement of how the young person is feeling emotionally without being judgemental or dismissive of their views through the provision of positive and caring support.

Restoration of a positive self-image and high self-esteem is important if a young person is to become a productive member of society and develop through the later stages of development with no adverse effects.

There are numerous studies that show how genetics play a large part in a person's development, such as those examining the similarities in the lives of twins separated at birth. These studies have demonstrated that genetics must have a profound influence on the choices made in life despite the social influences along the way.

Nature theories are extreme in that they do not make any allowance for environmental factors and fail to take into account the ideal outcomes may be different depending on the culture and social norms of the child's environment. The ideals in each of these theories are mainly applicable to western societies. They assume that growth is linear and each person has the potential to reach the favourable outcome at each stage regardless of environmental influence.

The Nurture perspective states it is the environmental factors which determine a person's development and that genetics can be over written.

" Give me a dozen healthy infants, well formed, and my own specialised world to bring them up in and I'll guarantee to take any one of them at random and train him to become any type of specialist I might select – a doctor, lawyer, artist, merchant-chief and, yes, even a beggar-man and thief, regardless of his talents, penchants, abilities, vocations and race of his ancestors."

Watson (1925) as sited in Gross (2010, p809)

Watson believed that it was our experiences alone that shaped our future and provided that there were no biological disadvantages at birth, the choices made during life are a direct result of social learning and environmental factors. Hogg and Vaughan (2008)

There is a third, and growing theory in the nature verses nurture debate in that both nature and nurture affect development. Howe (1995) discusses the growing research into how both aspects can affect a person and detail studies on the Intelligence Quotient (IQ) of children living with adoptive families. The studies showed the children had a base IQ which was closer to that of their biological families than their adopted one. However, the study also showed that where positive environmental factors were in place, such as a better standard of schooling, the IQ was on average 12 points higher than their biological siblings, demonstrating that both nature and nurture are equally important.

Gross (2010) puts forward the observation that the nature verses nurture debate has extremes at each ends, Gesell's (1925) theory of Maturation for nature and Mead's (1935) theory of cultural relativism for nurture. In the middle ground is where we find Piaget's (1950) theory of cognitive development.

Gross (2010) also went on to explain how Piaget (1950) was engrossed by how a child's intellectual development changes as it grows. He put this down to changes in physical development aided by external influences. Aldergate et al (2006) provides a good example of how a child learns from its surroundings using both base instinct (genetics) and past experiences (environment) to reach equilibrium in understanding their surroundings. A young infant will explore its surroundings through its mouth and will suck objects to understand them better. At this young age a child's mouth is more sensitive than that of an adult, so providing better sensory feedback. A child will gradually learn there is a difference between a toy block and a teat and the way in which it sucks each object will change.

Like many other theories, Piaget (1950) also describes how people develop through stages. However, he also put forward the idea that how people pass through each stage is underpinned by two things, assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is how a person makes sense of new experiences by applying previously learnt information. If this can be done through previous experiences, then equilibrium is reached. It is not always possible to approach a new situation with the application of previously learnt knowledge, especially at a very young age. This would be done in conjunction with the accommodation process. When faced with something

new, such as being presented with a toy apple for the first time, the child will compare the colour, shape and texture of the object to something familiar, such as a real apple, and in doing so will gain an understanding of the object. However, if the child attempts to eat the toy apple it will learn that it is not edible and through investigation will gain an understanding of this new object. This new information will then be accommodated for use in future development. Assimilation and accommodation work in synergy, one does not work without the other. It is with these mechanisms that a child grows to understand their surroundings. Walker and Crawford (2010) provide an overview of the stages in Piaget's (1950) theory as outlined below;

Sensorimotor (0 – 2 years) – a child uses its basic senses and movement to explore and understand its environment.

Preoperational (2 – 6 years) – a child is able to use basic logic to understand its surroundings.

Concrete Operations (7 – 12 years) – by now, a child is able to use imagination to understand its environment and can see things from the perspective of others.

Formal Operations (12+ years) – A child can now form new ideas and support them with logic, even without prior experience of the event.

For a long time, Piaget's (1950) theory of cognitive development has been used in the field of education as it provides a comprehensive view on how a child learns and thinks. The concrete operations stage, between 7 to 12 years, sees a child being able to make sense of their surroundings and

understand and imagine situations that they have not experienced themselves. This gives a child the ability to think outside the box and see life from the perspective of others. To reach this stage of development, a child must have basic logic developed in the prior, preoperational stage. This existing knowledge and skill base will allow them to understand their own environment and how they can affect it but will lack the understanding to see things from other peoples view point. The old adage of being able to walk before being able to run demonstrates this quite well.

One of the criticisms of Piaget's (1950) work is that the theory views a child as being a reactive creature, adapting to its environment. Working alongside Piaget (1950) work, Vygotsky, as sited in Gross (2010) described the child as being more of a social creature who is able to interact and influence its surroundings whilst learning from them. It is this slight swing towards the direction of the nurture side which has led to an ever increasing abandonment of Piaget's (1950) work.

Signs of mental and/or physical neglect may be evident in a child's inability to progress effectively through the cognitive development stages. If a child has been left unattended in a crib for long periods of time, the child will be deprived of the opportunity to explore and understand its surroundings. This would limit the child's intellectual development. Early intervention from social workers may help a child catch up or keep achieving milestones in development at an appropriate age in line with its peers.

Social work intervention at this stage, depending on the severity of the neglect, might involve taking the child into care. This should always be a last

resort and is a less favourable option to the alternative – working alongside the child's family. A social worker would be expected to review and evaluate the situation, taking into account risks and the views of all parties involved, and work with the family to develop a relationship of trust to ensure the needs of the child are met. Building trust with the family would provide an insight to any underlying problems which may require attention, such as post natal depression. Involvement in counselling, support groups and activities such as play therapy are beneficial activities which would not only improve the relationship with the carer but aid development.

A solid relationship between child and mother (or primary care giver) is the cornerstone to every child's development. This may not form an obvious part of the theories outlined above, but contact with " society" in the early stages of life often consists of the child's mother and close relatives. It is these relationship between mother and child that are discussed in Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment.

At birth, the human child is helpless and must rely on the care of other if it is to survive. Its base instinct is to form an attachment with its mother to ensure it basic needs are met. Newborn babies have a focal point of around 10 inches; the distance from breast to face, so the child can focus on its mothers face while feeding. Newborns are also able to recognise their mothers voice from birth and when cuddled are comforted by their mother's heartbeat. All this ensures a strong bond is formed between mother and child in the first few weeks of life. During this time, a child develops other ways of keeping its mother close; smiling, crying, and babbling which will later develop into speech.

Bowlby (1969) demonstrated there are four main types of attachment that can form depending and the child's relationship with its mother. There are outlined in Walker and Crawford (2010) and summarised below;

Secure attachment – this is the desired form of attachment in which a child feels secure in its environment and has no fear of being abandoned. The child may become upset when separated from their mother but are quickly consoled upon their return. A child with this type of attachment to its mother is able to form productive secondary attachments with other care givers and people in general in later life. The child develops a sense of confidence to explore its environment with that knowledge that they have a safe base to return to.

Insecure – Avoidant attachment – the child appears to be independent and is disinterested when separated from a care giver and upon their returns. They seem unaffected by the separation from its mother. This child is insecure but masks this with self-reliance.

Insecure – Resistant/Ambivalent attachment – this is often manifested in a clingy child; a child who is unwilling to explore their environment independently for fear of being separated and abandoned from its mother. When reunited with their mother, they are often inconsolable showing obvious anger towards their mother for leaving them.

Disorganised attachment – a child with a disorganised attachment can be unpredictable; violent towards their mother one minute then staring into space the next. They often show no interest in their surroundings and show

no effect of the comings and goings of their mothers. This form of attachment often leaves the child feeling helpless or angry.

Bowlby (1969) also accepted the fact that a child may fit into more than one of the above categories or in some cases, none of them. The theory understood that when considering the human condition, not all children will fall neatly into the categories above; or if they have formed one of the insecure attachments it does not always lead to problems in later life.

Through his studies, Bowlby (1969) demonstrated that a poor attachment between mother and child can be damaging and have lasting effects. The most well-known theory validating this is that of maternal deprivation. This shows a direct link between insecure attachments and delinquency, mental illness and difficulties in parenting in later life, as debated by Howe (1995).

Deprivation of maternal care can lead to a child being less developed in all areas of life; physically, emotionally, intellectually and socially. These negative effects can also have an impact on the acquisition of language.

Bowlby's (1969) ideas lead to a number of positive changes in the practical approach to social work. Bowlby (1969) advocated talking to children, letting the child express their views and wishes and where possible, putting these suggestions into practise. The research also outlined the negative effects of placing children in institutional care where they are unable to form lasting and secure attachments. Bowlby (1969) also connected the importance of making long term care plans when placing a child in short term care. This may occur when a carer becomes unwell and is no longer able to provide the care require; it may be a long term problem which will not be resolved to its

original form or may be short term when a carer is admitted into hospital stay.

Burman (1994) criticised Bowlby's (1969) theory of attachment for keeping women in the home. In the attachment theory, the primary care giver is always cites as being the mother; it does not recognise the fact that fathers, grandparents and day care providers now make up a growing part of those providing primary care. This is evident in a report from The Office of National Statistics (2002) which found a fourfold increase in the provision of day care from 62 in 1987 to 281 in 2000. Bowlby (1969) also failed to discuss the negative impacts of an attachment that is too exclusive. A child may become too reliant on one care giver and never achieve full independence and when separated from its care giver can become extremely upset.

This is most evident when dealing with bereavement or following the loss of a carer due to illness; the carer may no longer be able to provide the level of care required. Bereavement and loss can cause a number of problems both at a young age and in later life.

Greif is an emotion many people feel when faced with a bereavement of a loved one or loss of a relationship (marriage breakups), job or the feeling or the loss of security following a traumatic incident. Kubler Ross, as cited by Crame (2010) discussed the five stages of grief which are outlined below;

Denial – ignoring the situation or an unjust sense as to why this is happening to them.

Anger – a feeling that others must be held responsible for the situation.

Bargaining – offering a trade for a reversal of a situation.

Depression – the grief may be all encompassing leaving the person feeling low and apathetic.

Acceptance – coming to terms with the event.

Kubler Ross was keen to point out that the above stages are not liners in that a person does not move from one to the next and also that there is no time frame for each stage. Some people may also only experience a few of the stages.

Greif can manifest itself physically in many ways including weight loss, anger, depression or an inability to look after a person's own personal needs. It is at this stage that a social worker may become involved.

The intervention from the social worker may be brief in that they only act as a referral to organisations that support people who have suffered a loss or bereavement. Often, discussing the event with others who have similar experiences is enough to help a person move on. The social worker may be involved with helping friends and family understand the process of grief which is different in each individual case. It is important for a social worker to be able to empathise with a person suffering from grief and understand the ways in which it can affect them.

On closer examination of the theories outline in this essay, it is clear that caution must be used when considering their application in social work practice due to their specific, and often limited views on development.

However, that being said, each theory can also prove to be beneficial in providing an understanding of why people behave the way they do.

Each of the separate theories are able to argue their own distinct view on why people develop in specific ways depending on their genetics and environmental influences over their lifetime. The secure attachment a child develops with its mother in its early years may cause problems in later life when this attachment is broken through death; what was once beneficial may become problematic. It is these deviances from the norm that may call for social work interventions to be put in place.

Many of the theories outlined above were researched and developed in a society very different from the modern society today. This is evident in Bowlby's attachment theory in which it was presented that primary secure attachments take place between the child and its mother. In modern western societies and those with different cultures, it is often the extended family or day care facilities which provide the bulk of care for young children.

It is important for a social worker to be aware of the theories which aim to help explain and provide an understanding of people's behaviour; but as with most things, this knowledge must be maintained and kept up to date with the latest research. As society changes and develops, so to must the theories which aim to explain people's roles within it. Only when armed with a comprehensive understanding of human growth and development can a social worker hope to provide effective interventions when dealing with clients and their families.