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Overview of Developmental Theories

Looking at Humans Over Time

Perhaps the most widely used conceptual approaches to describing and explaining human activity, appearance, and experience are developmental.

From word soup, we ladle the following synonyms for the term *development*: expansion, elaboration, growth, evolution, unfolding, opening, maturing, maturation, maturity, ripeness (Dictionary.com, n.d.).



Drawing 3.1 Developmental Theories Word Soup



Inherent in each of these words is movement or growth on a hierarchy from diminutive to grand, from immature to mature, and so forth. Reflecting positive movement, developmental theories have typically been referred to as *stage, phase, life course theories*, and, more recently, *developmental science* (Damon & Lerner, 2006). Initial theories of human development were concerned with how individuals unfold in an orderly and sequential fashion. However, over the past several decades, human development has expanded beyond looking at the passage of the individual through time to positioning human function and capability within comparative hierarchical frameworks. We discuss all of these approaches within the genre of developmental theories, noting that they have different scopes and foci, but contain commonalities. What unites all of them is the role of “development” depicted as degree of maturation or directional movement as descriptive and explanatory of humans, their interactions, and their contexts. Some developmental theories posit specific stages through which individual humans or entities pass and must negotiate, while others see chronological maturation as a fluid process without discrete identifiable boundaries that delineate the boundaries of entrance and exit from one state into the next. Selected developmental theories focus on processes proximal to humans, while others look at the interaction of multiple factors to describe and explain maturation and functioning of humans. Still others look at human functioning within large distal contexts such as nation-states.

Of the many theorists who have suggested that passage through stages is an important factor in explaining human phenomena, Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) may be the most famous developmental theorist. In a sense, Freud may be viewed as an intellectual pioneer in that he departed from moral explanations for atypical human experience advanced by his contemporaries such as von Krafft Ebing (1840–1902). But, Freud is only one of many theorists who have looked at sequential, hierarchical unfolding as important to understanding human description, change, and comparison. Looking further back in the history of developmental theory (Mosher, Youngman, & Day, 2006), Adolphe Quetelet (1796–1874) has actually been hailed for his significant contribution to understanding human phenomena chronologically. Other important early theorists include Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746–1827), William James (1842–1910), G. Stanley Hall (1844–1924), Alfred Binet (1857–1911), John Dewey (1859–1952), George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), and Charlotte Malachowski Buhler (1893–1974) (Mosher, Youngman, & Day, 2006). Unfortunately, these important theorists developed their work in isolation from one another and it was not until the early to mid-20th century that a seminal body of human developmental theory coalesced and then expanded to human flourishing in the late 20th century (Nussbaum & Sen, 1993).

According to Damon and Lerner (2006), early theories following human maturation over longitudinal time were primarily located in singular disciplines such as developmental psychology, motor development, and so forth. More recently, however, and in concert with postmodern and post-postmodern thinking, developmental theories have been renamed developmental science, capabilities, and so forth, indicating their interdisciplinarity with claims supported by systematic inquiry as well as institutional and even global evidence.

Given the breadth of developmental theories and the large scope of topical concern, and building on Thomas's (2001) taxonomy, we parse these theories into two categories, grand and specific, with important distinctions.

Distinguishing Between Grand and Specific Theories

Grand and specific theories are concerned with human movement and growth. Although not directly addressed in most theories, a hierarchy from least to most desirable—whether expressed as immature to mature, limited to fully developed, and so forth—is implicit in developmental theories.

Grand theories focus on and treat human phenomena holistically. That is to say, the unit of analysis is the whole person moving through time or context, and more recently, due to the erosion of dualism, contexts as elements of human functioning have been included in theories of human development. For example, Sigmund Freud and Erik H. Erikson (1902–1994), treated human growth and development as the total unfolding of an individual while Martha Nussbaum (2000) characterizes optimal human flourishing as an economic resource phenomenon linked to the degrees of freedom, so to speak, to access and actualize basic resources. These broad hierarchical theories, originating from roots in resource economics, concern themselves with the rank ordering of health and welfare on the basis of human functioning within entities including geographies such as nation-states (Klugman, 2009; Nussbaum & Sen, 2009). Although not typically discussed as theories of human development, we partially locate and discuss them in this category because of the moniker their own authors attribute to them, *human development and capabilities*, as well as their adherence to the axioms of this genre. Human development and capabilities theories are also discussed within new and emerging theories because they cross over into interdisciplinary postmodern thinking about humans in context.

Specific theories direct their focus to a narrow embodied domain, such as cognition, motor development, moral development, neurological development, genetics, psychological development, multisystemic development, and so forth.

Because of the enormity of literature, all of the theories and ideas cannot be critically examined in a single text. We have selected those that represent their categories and provide sufficient breadth and depth for illustration, analysis, use, and, of course, extrapolation.

Table 3.1 lists the theories and ideas discussed throughout the book and locates them within the categories of grand and specific approaches.

THINKING POINT



Think of other examples of grand and specific developmental theories. Compare them for scope and use in informing professional action.

Table 3.1 The Location of Developmental Theories

Grand Developmental Theories	Specific Developmental Theories
Psychoanalysis (Freud)	Cognitive development (Piaget, Case, Goldberg)
Ego psychology (Erikson)	Moral development (Kohlberg)
Analytical psychology (Jung)	Physical development (Gesell, Ashbaugh)
Adult development (Levinson, Gould, L'Abate, Strauch)	Spiritual development (Fowler)
Culture (Wexler)	Death and dying (Kübler-Ross)
Human development and capabilities (Sen, Nussbaum)	Neurobiology (Wexler)

Historically, the developmental approaches that address individual human unfolding over time have spanned the chronological domain from birth to death. However, currently, with elongated technological, spiritual, biological, and contextual gazes, “prebirth” and “postmortem” description and explanations have nudged their way into more traditional “womb to tomb” theories of individual human development. We defer our discussions of the prenatal and postmortem human, conditions that precede formal birth and succeed formal death, and definition of nations, governments, and contexts to other chapters, as they fit more comfortably under other genres in our taxonomy. Thus, Chapters 4 and 5 enter the world of developmental theory from infancy through old age. Chapter 4 begins the discussion of the hierarchical growth elements of human development and capability theory.

Developmental Theory Axioms

Before examining and illustrating the application of grand and specific approaches to human development, Table 3.2 identifies the axioms that delimit and guide our analysis.

As illustrated in the axioms, to a large extent, developmental theories advance the ideas that underpin many areas of our lives. They tell us what to expect as we reach certain ages, what not to expect, what our government is likely to afford us according to the level of development of a nation, what distinguishes one developmental group from another, and the nature of maturity. Moreover, these theories provide the explanatory basis for typical and atypical unfolding of an entity from its birth through death or origin through elimination. As such, we establish and evaluate individual lives, groups, governments, and even nations according to expectations of movement and change throughout their time spans; we compare single cases to theorized expectations, and determine the extent to which cases fit or do not fit within a

Table 3.2 Developmental Theory Axioms

1. Developmental approaches are based on how individual humans and human entities grow, mature, and compare to one another. Thus, these theories are explicitly or implicitly concerned with the hierarchical process of aging even if they do not identify that focus.
2. Developmental descriptions and explanations, to a greater or lesser degree, posit typical and desirable appearance, milestones, experiences, logical explanations, and qualities.
3. Developmental approaches are descriptive, explanatory, and prescriptive. These theories not only group phenomena according to a hierarchy of growth as well as what is assumed to be typical for a particular age or context and why, but also assert or imply what should be now and in the future. Thus, the typical is not only the most commonly observed for a cohort but becomes the standard for comparison and, often, for example or nonexample of desirability.
4. Developmental approaches propose the unidirectional longitudinal trajectory of growth. Related to corporeal experience and development as one ages, one grows and changes both quantitatively and qualitatively. A person, unless considered to be abnormal, cannot “ungrow” or grow backwards. Development of contextual entities is theorized to follow a similar trajectory from less to more desirable.
5. As individuals and entities develop, experiences are additive, in that past events impact the present and contemporary events influence future development, regardless of the longevity of the phenomenon.
6. Over time, humans and entities become increasingly mature and complex unless decline is theorized or observed.
7. Growth and development are not consistent throughout a single life or entity; that is, individual uniqueness emerges from the differential growth and development of some specific parts over others and rates of growth and development are not constant.
8. Developmental approaches provide the platform for contrasting individuals, groups and entities along specified standards. That is to say, these approaches identify the “typical and desirable,” with varying correlates of maturation, and use these as metrics or benchmarks, so to speak, for comparison.

desirable range. We even use theories of development to create and market unique products to specific age and national groups.

Think of children’s products. In children’s books, websites, and other reading materials, we base the images, reading level, and even content on what is theorized to be of interest and relevance to children’s ages.

Now, think of fashion. Certainly, we have all heard people say something like “that fashion is too old for you. It makes you look like your mother.”

Nations even brand themselves to denote their maturation with regard to economic development, rights, and public good.

THINKING POINT



What other practices can you think of that developmental theories inform?

Of particular importance in this category of theory is the relevance of developmental descriptions to defining normalcy and average. Examined in greater detail in Chapters 4 and 5, developmental theorists, through observation of phenomena along a maturation trajectory, seek to find common characteristics, and thus uncommon characteristics, of people and entities grouped by age or maturity, and then, on the basis of these observations, of what is typical or average, propose what should be expected from each cohort or grouping. More recently, diversity variables have been introduced into developmental theories, segmenting populations and geographies and related expectations for subcategory norms. We address this important theoretical trend in Chapters 9 through 12, but bring it forward in this chapter to note the development of developmental theories in themselves and to foreground the contextual nature of these theories as well (Damon & Lerner, 2006). Consider the following examples to illustrate.

Jacqueline is a 26-year-old woman, who, shortly after birth, was diagnosed with Down syndrome and cognitive impairment. Let us think of those two constructs in terms of the axioms of developmental theory. White infants have typical appearances and behaviors that form the basis for developmental normalcy. Because Jacqueline's appearance differed from that of typical infants, she was suspect for "abnormality" caused by medical pathology, which was confirmed on the basis of examining her descriptive bodily appearances as compared to most other infants. Comparison against the typical standards of appearance for her ethnicity and age-group provided the rationale for further classifying her within a category of "abnormal." Unlike white infants, Jacqueline had almond shaped eyes. She also had atypical creases on the palms of her hands. Further observation and testing against a set of standards provided the evidence to support the deductive accuracy of her diagnosis. For example, Jacqueline's test results for intellectual function were below the standard for her age-group, her movements and muscle tone were different from her age cohorts, and so forth.

Now consider Wanda and Melissa, Jacqueline's two sisters. They both illustrate the axioms of developmental theory from the normative perspective. As a young adult, Wanda was in the range for embarking upon marriage, and thus, her plans for intimacy and marriage are considered to be typical as well as desirable. As for Melissa, while she was considered normative throughout her childhood, because she conformed to what was typical of children within her age cohort, as she entered adolescence, she found that she was not sexually attracted to anyone, and thus decided to remain single. The acceptability of her absence of perceived sexuality is not as clear if examined through a developmental theoretical lens as that of her sister, Wanda.

Now consider the Human Development Index, a measure of the level of development of a nation. This index parses nations into four major hierarchical categories, very high (the most desirable ranking), high (the top middle ranking), medium (second to lowest ranking) and low (lowest and least desirable ranking). Implicit in the scoring is that the highest ranked countries are “baked” and most desirable, while the lowest ranked countries are substandard or as labeled in previous iterations of this index, “underdeveloped” (United Nations Development Programme, 2009).

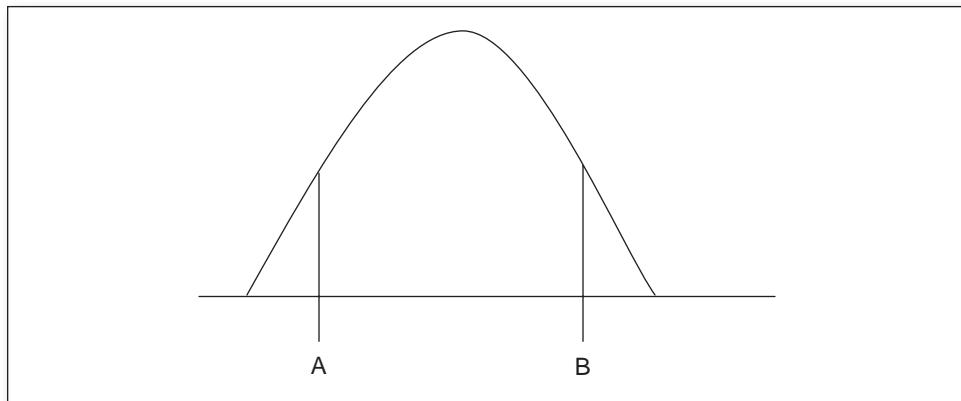
In contemporary and emerging theories, and even in some of the more contemporary developmental approaches, conceptualizations of what is typical, and thus desirable, have changed in response to increasingly diverse and global communities. However, within the rubric of classical and even many current developmental theories, Melissa and Jacqueline and countries such as Ethiopia would still be considered non-normative, substandard, or undesirable even though their differences may be accepted within new and emerging theories. The axioms of developmental theories identify what is common to all of the theories located in Chapters 4 and 5.

The Normal Curve: Mathematical Foundation of Developmental Theories

The normal curve is one of the most important constructs that provided the scholarly rationale for developmental lenses. Examining the logical foundation of developmental descriptions and explanations reveals Quetelet’s (1835, 1969) mathematical shape of the normal or bell-shaped curve as the conceptual basis.

Looking in more detail at the mathematical construct, the lines at Points A and B represent the limits of normal or average. Thus, any score that falls between A and B would be considered normal, acceptable, or typical, while those falling outside of either A or B would be abnormal, substandard or suprastandard. What is above average (in some but

Figure 3.1 Normal Curve



not all instances) or average becomes prescriptive of what “should be” and specifies the ways in which phenomena are—and by implication, are not—expected to look and function. These norms change as one travels through chronological time, and abstract or geographic context.

At an early age, Jacqueline’s behavior deviated from that of her peers in the same cohort. Falling outside of the “typical” performance of activity, she tested at slow cognitive development and below average cognitive function, or what is referred to as cognitive impairment. Because her IQ score fell below Point A on the normal curve for her age-group, she was considered subnormal, so to speak, and thus the deviance in her behavior was identified as an impairment diagnosed as a “developmental disability.” Children who score within the typical range (between Points A and B) would be considered of normal intelligence and those scoring above would be considered superior.

Illustrating the undesirability of “above average” is hyperkinesis or excessive activity. Despite residing within the supranormal range of the bell-shaped curve, this level of activity begets the diagnostic label of attention deficit and hyperactivity disorder (Greene, 2010) and is served up for pharmacological manipulation.

Now, think of the term, midlife crisis. This term usually refers to someone who is embarking on middle age, and “acts” like an individual who is of adolescent age.

Now, illustrating the application of Quetelet’s work to nations, consider the comparison between Norway and Togo. Norway is rated above average on all three indicators of development: life expectancy at birth, per capita income, and gross domestic product (United Nations Development Programme, 2009). Norway is therefore considered highly developed. Togo scored way below the mean or average, remanding it to an underdeveloped status.

THINKING POINT



Think of examples of behavioral phenomena that are normal at some ages and not at others.

Inherent in the concept of midlife crisis is that the individual proceeding through midlife is acting in a manner that is typical of a teenager, and thus not expected and suitable for an older age cohort.

Or, think of the terms *immature* or *decent standard of living*. Implicit in both are desirables and undesirables.

Evidentiary Basis of Developmental Theories

Referring to the *development of developmental theories*, the legitimacy of evidence for supporting these theories has changed over time. As detailed in subsequent chapters, seminal classical theories, such as those advanced by Piaget and Freud, were anchored

on the observations by the theorists themselves, without support from what is considered today as “science” or systematic inquiry. Piaget barely looked beyond the walls of his own domicile, creating his theory of cognitive development from observations of his own children. It is curious to think that Piagetian theory, which forms the basis of age expectations for capacity to learn, emerged from and inscribes Piaget’s offspring as the “norm” of desirable thinking. Interestingly, Freud looked inward, and to his own patients—whom he himself defined as pathological—as subjects for theorizing about normal psychosexual development.

Moving forward in the 20th century, traditional developmental theorists posited and tested their ideas through contemporary measurement strategies (DePoy & Gitlin, 2011). This approach to asserting developmental “truth” is intriguing as well, given the deductive methods used to develop and validate measurement. Recall the discussion in Chapter 1 about logical methods of theory support. The sequence of measurement begins with the selection of a theory, proceeds to the isolation and lexical (dictionary) definition (word soup, anyone?) of particular concepts to be measured, parsing the concepts into measurable items, and then selecting a numeric plan for scoring. Validating the measure involves statistical testing that one can read about in any research methods text. Why, then, bother to discuss measurement here?

We suggest that the measurement process for validating a theory can be tautological. Tautological, in this case, is the circular thinking process of defining a phenomenon by its measurement and then measuring it by its definition. For example, in his book, titled *Brown*, Rodriguez (2003) seeks to debunk the truth value of the category of Hispanic. He suggests that people from diverse Spanish speaking nations are defined as *Hispanic* and then counted in large part because they speak Spanish as a first language and they originate from the delineated geography, reifying the category by counting its definitional elements. Measurement is discussed more fully as supportive of theory as the book proceeds. While nomothetic (statistical methods of inquiry that seek to reveal group commonalities and differences) form the investigatory foundation for many developmental theories, contemporary developmental theorists and researchers have begun to turn to multiple methods and varieties of evidence for creating and validating theory. Be on the lookout, then, for evidentiary support for developmental theory as you select legitimate frameworks for social work practice.

Summary

This chapter introduced two divisions of developmental theory: grand and specific. Axioms were then advanced that are common to developmental theories, followed by a discussion of the mathematical basis for the normal-not normal, average-not average binaries inherent in developmental descriptions and explanations. This chapter concluded with a discussion and commentary on evidence supporting theory, highlighting the need to be cognizant of the evidentiary foundation and validation methods for each theory.