



Title	BEYOND PSYCHOLOGICAL LIMITS : APPLYING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION
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Citation	乳幼児発達臨床センター年報, 15, 1-6
Issue Date	1993-03
Doc URL	http://hdl.handle.net/2115/25285
Type	bulletin (article)
File Information	15_P1-6.pdf



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BEYOND PSYCHOLOGICAL LIMITS: APPLYING HUMAN DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATION

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Abstract

In this introductory essay a new type of professional is identified and named as Educational Developmentalist. Such persons are concerned with formulating appropriate theory and putting into practice a philosophy which accepts two as its minimum working unit. They endorse the concept of ecological niche in which organism and setting are entwined. And they are knowledgeable about the range of provisions, from biological to cultural, including constraints and opportunities across generations.

Keywords : Educational developmentalist, human development

In Europe, the notion of a self-contained individual arose in conjunction with socio-political changes triggered by the French Revolution. This was exported to various colonies and has become epitomised in the genre of movies known generally as “Westerns”: an armed, lone drifter makes his mark and accepts the consequences of his actions, whether as villain or hero.

This idea has a powerful grip on our imaginations. As an academic discipline and area of study “psychology” has been nurtured in a hegemony which has as its nucleus the twin concepts of self and of control. Even a cursory examination of North American psychological history reveals the extent to which such constructions have served to create a respectable conservative “ecclesiastical” order. It is precisely because students of psychology have tended to limit their enquiries to an individualistic ideology that their horizons concerning human development have been restricted to a flat earth approach.

The following points identify and illustrate some concerns about contemporary approaches to studying human development.

First, since so much of human development is taught in nonPsychology Departments (including, for instance, Anthropology, Sociology, Education and Family Studies) then psychologists ought to be wary of staking any exclusive claims. Human development is neither a branch nor a subdiscipline of psychology. Indeed the reverse is true: psychology, amongst others, may offer some approaches to studying human

development. Unfortunately there is often a slippage from discussing “human development” to terms of “developmental psychology”. This “error” is perpetuated by many text authors who entitle their books “Human Development” but within the opening chapter define this as “Developmental Psychology”. The point to be made here is that the academic study of human development involves much more than many psychologists appear to be aware of or concerned about.

Second, as may be expected, the hub for most psychologists is “the individual”. Radiating from this centre are numerous spokes. One declares the unique unit is a machine-like part, shaped from reinforcement contingencies and oiled subsequently by conformity. Another spoke demonstrates how an early cradling in an unconscious sea of fantasies represents scripts passed down familial lines. A third spoke adopts the cleanliness of sterile laboratory environments, devoid of social contamination, to study thought; whether as cognition, or perception or intelligence. A fourth spoke addresses collectives, but these are typically mere aggregates of individuals. Connecting these and other spokes provides the rim of psychology’s wheel. This is hardly surprising given the socio-political contexts in which psychology has been nurtured in the West. My point is that a narrow focus upon bounded individuals, no matter how well-intentioned, is crippling developmental studies. This is not to deny either the relevance or the importance of individuals in contemporary society.

Such individual orientations may well be central for psychology but they are marginally relevant for human development. Unfortunately, many of the so-called contextualists with their Matroiska doll metaphor are still putting individuals in their places.

A third point is that merely shifting a developmental window from a particular isolated period to a life-span approach does not necessarily change an underlying individualistic orientation. It is as if the same fixed-focus lens has been used but zoomed to merely extend a general frame.

Fourth, although pluralism is often endorsed this can quickly become too top-heavy or too ornate, either toppling over or hiding essential features behind a façade of trivia. Authors of a contemporary text entitled “Human development across the life-span” encapsulate this point nicely by their unintentional howler when writing: “Human development is the study of an individual’s development from birth to death from an interdisciplinary perspective” (Hughes and Noppe, 1991). Part of the trouble with giving lip-service to pluralism is that proponents often assemble a range of contributions but join them almost arbitrarily like separate railway carriages, linked but not fused.

In summary of these developmental biases my points are: that the study of human development ought not be confused with developmental psychology which is a narrow specialty derivative; that an individual hub as the epicentre of action creates a psychological unicycle suitable for flat-earth journeys hugging familiar coastlines; that “life-span” approaches are often simply extending a snap-shot frame whilst still perpetuating an individualistic ideology and, finally, that a multi-disciplinary approach may well lead to factionalism if competitiveness remains unbridled.

Each of the above points is now addressed. A general aim is to provide an alter-

native view about human development study, as a backdrop for Educational Developmentalists.

First, the scope of human development is as extensive as there are ways of getting along with others. There are well-known age differences, typically represented by familiar stage theorists (like Piaget and Kohlberg). There are also functional phases declared by social groupings (represented by Erikson). And, in addition, there are relevant gender issues to consider (such as Josselson and Gilligan point out). Less obviously, there are cultural and genetic histories involved and the tools of representation or mediation (that Vygotsky mentions). We are gradually becoming aware that some cherished notions like "self" are not universal but socially constructed (as Harre aptly acknowledges and argues). As a simple and practical example, should you ask scholars to name those who have made the greatest contribution to the study of human development, then a broad crosssection will be reported with few psychologists included.

The second point is much more difficult to appreciate because a complete alternative is required, a whole different philosophy. We have tended to endorse the self-contained individual, especially in the West, with firm self-other boundaries, a sense of personal control and exclusivity. As Sampson (1988) notes an alternative is in ensembled individuals having fluid boundaries, field control and a sense of inclusiveness. In a similar vein others are suggesting a "dialogical self" exists beyond rationalism and individualism (e.g. Hermans, 1992). One subtle point here is that we are debunking the ideology of individualism but not individuals. That is, regardless of one's philosophical orientation there are still skin-bounded, bi-pedal, distinct units. However, just because such entities can be graded, transported or put into a workforce does not mean this is the only significant study unit. In spite of what managers may wish, generals desire, politicians vie for or psychologists declare humans are more connected to one another than they are separated. What is called for is a philosophy of "us-ness" rather than "me-ness", of "thou" rather than "you". Social groups which do not highly value or use frequently personal pronouns (like I, you, he/she), identical twins, religious orders which are uncontaminated by a self-contained individualism can make important contributions to our understandings about human nature.

Psychology, as the study of individuals, is more often than not about power. In understanding the dynamics of social power we need to comprehend the architecture of social institutions and their histories. Although legitimate power is available, as mentor, guide, teacher, power is so often corrupted into aggression or dominance, and antagonists such as submissiveness or helplessness. Into this web of individualism psychology has ensnared the study of human development quite unwittingly. Educational developmentalists need to be aware of their histories; of what contributed to their presence. However, it is the endorsement of twoness, of duality without paradox, which establish an alternative working base.

For the third issue, consider a cycle of seasons. This is hard to document with only a set of unrelated snapshots. Of course we can "read" a season in an outdoor photograph by identifying sunny skies, green-leafed trees and "light" weight clothes usually worn in summer. But in doing so we are aware of what to look for, knowing

already that seasons do exist. My point is that unless there is movement, a series of events connected by an underlying theme, then single episodes are unique, unrelated and separate. Thus, to continue the analogy, we can read a person's behaviour if we are aware of their relationship history and have a sense of salient developmental themes. To create these themes is an important task which will demand concerted effort from many scholars. One is to appreciate phylogenetic contributions upon ontogenetic development, of being able to document why it is certain relationship styles are functional and how these are sustained by social constructions. As a group, attachment theorists are on the right path here but they are not yet free of an individualistic ethos.

Pluralism, my final point, is often accepted by developmentalists as an invitation to include a greater range of topics. Unfortunately though, this can quickly deteriorate into confusion because there is just too much to assimilate. And, more to the point, it is typically a mere extension of monism, the cult of the individual. Both of these aspects are recognised in contemporary text books which are like directories about individual growth and development.

How can Educational Developmentalists (EDs) be expected to be different, to offer services which others are not already providing? In short, what is their habitat? I suggest several themes.

First, EDs are not only offering a psychological orientation. They may well need to be involved with individual assessment, be this for personality, cognitive advantage or impairment, or even attachment style. For EDs the concern is not a fully functioning self, but a self in relationships. As social scientists we will attend to the dynamics of broader settings, nestling personal accounts into the general situation. Of critical importance here is the recognition that EDs begin from a dyad so that individual data merely supplements rather than organises involvement. Thus outcome measures are interpreted in terms of relationships with others; as parents, as clinicians or as partners.

Second, since "power" is one of the more important constructs in many social systems EDs will need to recognise its various expressions. To understand power behaviour it is necessary to recognise the power motive, "a disposition to strive for certain kinds of goals, or to be affected by certain kinds of incentives" (Winter, 1973, p. 17). In my opinion we cannot escape from power's influence since this is a basic human motive. How the motive is nurtured will depend to a large extent on the affordances offered by social networks. Amongst emergent personal styles adapted to prevailing social conditions are: aggressive-hostile, depressed-helpless, cold-withdrawn, compulsively helpful and, finally, domineering. These are all separate themes of the power motive, and particular variations will be played out for selected audiences. Not only are there cultural differences in power related behaviour, there will be gender preferences too.

Once again let me emphasise, this approach begins with twoness; it does not take for granted individual responsibility. In any educational context it is the setting tone which determines outcomes. Knowledge too will need to be reconfigured; rather than something which is privately owned it is shared collectively, generated and accepted by groups. Telling others what to do and how to do it is obviously power in

action, but whether this is with gentle encouragement or direct bullying makes a world of difference to what transpires.

A third reorientation theme involves ecological considerations. The greening of our beliefs and actions has accelerated over the past two decades, hastened by environmental concerns about pollution, ozone depletion and virus contamination. Traditionally, many researchers have been attending to mapping habitats, documenting demographic features from a naive systems perspective. That is, they tend to compartmentalise phenomena and merely describe interactions all the while maintaining discrete entities. In my opinion J. J. Gibson's view about niche is relevant. A niche refers to how an organism lives, involving a radical view of bound organism-setting interdependence (Kirkland and Morgan, 1991). As mentioned previously, individuals are selected and are important for some purposes. It is when these elements are reified and treated as being unique, without attention to any emergent co-dependencies, that a monist ideology is maintained.

An ecological perspective requires an understanding of adaptiveness. This includes a sense of interdependent wholeness without undue attention to any single aspect. Like the familiar analogy; a combination of elements like oxygen and hydrogen produces a water molecule which has characteristics which could not be predicted by any consideration of separate components. The same thing applies to growing humans, and this needs to be taken into accounts about development. The heart of the matter then is how people get along.

In many countries the familiar nurturant group is changing; single parents, unemployment, refugee camps, starvation, pollution, disease are contributing to a different sort of understanding about human development. We are only beginning to grasp the magnitude of these matters for a species and have little data to guide policy decisions. In many instances all too familiar expressions of power are dominating; civil disobedience, ethnic group violence, and outright war are inflicting tremendous damage. Educational Developmentalists, aware of human nature and its varied forms of expression, can make a positive difference; know how to intervene with what and when. In my opinion it would be helpful to examine the concept "developmental ecopathology" to get additional bearings on relevant issues.

My next theme addresses another basic human motive; namely affiliation (or cooperation). This has been emphasised by feminist authors, many of whom have advanced alternative theories, methods and therapeutic interventions based on a "web of relatedness".

Educational Developmentalists already have available a rich literature about human attachments; corresponding theory, means of collecting relevant data, adequate interventions and colourful descriptions about life-story trajectories when pathology dominates to saturate family relationships. Bowlby's "secure base" metaphor, military though it is, goes some way toward emphasising affiliative involvement as a cornerstone for ongoing healthy development. Anxious babies, whether resistant/ambivalent or avoidant, and disorganised ones are likely to emerge from familial settings where the ethos is one of power-dominance; corrupting affiliation by nipping it in the bud.

A final theme concerns engagement. Educational Developmentalists have a professional responsibility to take a socially acceptable place in community settings; early child care, injury or prison rehabilitation, trauma centre, family therapy or schools. My own thinking on this matter is that EDs have a moral obligation to get involved and can make best estimate predictions about human development outcomes whatever the intervention of choice. Some EDs may choose to become embroiled in matters of policy within organisations through committees or by consultation, others may make signal contributions to their professional associations and others may elect to become involved with the dispossessed, families in plight, children cast out or people hurting deeply, afraid or violent. EDs can make a difference because they are aware of developmental pitfalls and possibilities.

Rather than being relegated to backup status, waiting to be called onto the playing field, EDs are in the midst of play itself as active team members. Education consists of involvement in a culture with fundamental knowledge created within an ecological niche which is, naturally, social. Such education is far more difficult to understand than derived knowledge which can be passed on by trainers or skilled instructors and assessed by familiar psychometric methods (Elkind, 1989). There is a subtlety in many educational activities which can be sensed by those attuned to ecological concerns but this is often difficult to explain objectively simply because it often involves the unspeakable; words fail.

In summary, Educational Developmentalists are acutely aware of the broader meaning of education. Education does not belong in any one place, it is not limited by buildings or programmes; it is the very essence of what goes on between people who are involved in cooperating even though one may be older or wiser or more skilled than the other. Power is undeniable but it can be positively toned rather than destructive, especially if attention is shifted from dominance to commonance. If we can reduce the fear of being hurt or injured, perhaps by taking each other's hands in peace, then trust may be initiated. From trust, like acorns, bigger things grow.

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