Developmental psychology

A field of psychology which examines how human behavior changes as a person matures through focusing on biological, emotional, physical, cognitive, and social changes that are age-related, sequential, and long-lasting.

Developmental psychologists study how characteristics and behaviors first appear and how and when they change. They study the relationships between different types of development, such as cognitive and social, as well as individual variations in development, both normal and deviant. Initially, developmental psychology focused on childhood but was subsequently expanded to cover changes that occur over the entire life span, from the intrauterine environment through childhood, adolescence, middle age, and maturity. Three processes that play a central role in development are growth, maturation, and learning. Growth refers to physical changes that are quantitative, such as increases in height or weight. Maturation involves anatomical, neurophysiological, and chemical transformations that change the way a person functions (such as a woman’s passage into or out of childbearing age). Learning involves relatively long-term changes in behavior or performance acquired through observation, experience, or training.

One of the oldest questions in developmental psychology involves the nature-nurture controversy, which asks how and to what degree nature (inherited or genetic factors influencing development) contributes to a person’s biological, emotional, cognitive, and social development, and to what degree it is the result of nurture (the influence of learning and experience in the environment). This issue has been debated for centuries by philosophers, who often argued strenuously for the predominance of one influence over the other (a famous example is the British philosopher John Locke’s concept of the newborn human being as a blank slate, or tabula rasa, to be formed by experience). Pioneered by the American psychologist Arnold Gesell, the concept of maturation, which is central to developmental psychology, stresses the role of nature in human development. Gesell observed that the motor skills of children develop in a fixed order through a series of stages relatively unaffected by outside influences. The interplay of nature and nurture, rather than the importance of one over the other, however, has gained a greater emphasis in the work of more recent figures, notably the Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget, whose theory of cognitive development in children has been a model for much subsequent work in the field. Going beyond simplistic dichotomies, scientists have been able to gather substantial amounts of specific data on the effects of heredity and environment through family, twin, and adoption studies. Current concepts of maturation focus on models in which each stage of a developmental process is defined not only by innate characteristics but also by increased receptivity (or “readiness”) toward certain environmental factors.

Another significant issue in the field of developmental psychology is the question of continuity versus stages, specifically, does an individual’s development occur in a gradual and progressive (continuous) fashion, or in a distinct series of discrete stages? In his pioneering theory of cognitive development, Piaget delineated a sequence of developmental stages that occur in a fixed order with each dependent on the previous ones (sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational). Subsequent research has challenged some of his assumptions, finding in some cases that children are capable of advanced thinking at younger ages than those posited by Piaget. Observations such as these have led to the conclusion that cognitive development is more uneven and less systematic than previously thought, and that children’s reasoning abilities in a specific situation may depend on variables—familiarity with certain objects, language comprehension, and prior experiences—that are not part of Piaget’s system. One recent model advances the notion of cognitive development in “pockets” rather than globally uniform levels or stages. Another alternative that has been suggested is an information processing model focusing on gradual quantitative advances in memory and other learning abilities rather than qualitative progress through a series of stages.

In addition to Piaget, another major influence in the area of human development was Erik Erikson, whose eight stages of psychosocial development, encompassing the entire life span from infancy through old age, inspired an interest in the continuation of development past childhood. Erikson’s work also popularized the concept of the adolescent “identity crisis” (a term he coined). Yet another type of development that has gained increased interest in recent years is moral development, which has been most extensively investigated by Lawrence Kohlberg. Presenting subjects with hypothetical moral
dilemmas, Kohlberg found that moral reasoning in children develops through three distinct levels (consisting of two stages each) between the age of seven and adolescence. Like Piaget’s theory, Kohlberg’s stages do not necessarily occur at a given age but they do occur consistently in a given order. Also, not all individuals reach the final stage, at which following rules and obeying the social order is superseded by the imperative of the individual conscience to obey ethical principles that may transcend the law. The universality of some of Kohlberg’s findings has been challenged in terms of applicability to non-Western cultures and women (Kohlberg’s research focused on men). When Carol Gilligan questioned subjects about moral conflicts, the reactions of male and female respondents differed significantly, and Gilligan drew up her own model for women.

See also Cognitive development; Cognitive psychology; Information-processing theory

Further Reading

Developmental stages, theories of

The various stages developmental psychologists theorize people go through as they develop from early life into childhood and beyond.

Developmental psychologists, by and large, study the way humans develop from an embryo into a full grown adult, focusing mainly on the factors that contribute to intelligence, personality, morality, and lifestyle. Of special interest are the effects certain stimuli have on the development of humans. For instance, does genetics pre-program a person to be introverted, or is that personality trait the result of specific life events that caused him or her to retreat inward? Or, did intense study of music from an early age make someone a gifted musician, or is that something their genes had pre-programmed from the moment of conception?

Over the past hundred years or so, several prominent psychologists and psychiatrists have devised various theories seeking to quantify the developmental stages humans pass through, and in doing so, have sought to map out this difficult process. One of the more famous theories of developmental psychology was put forth by the psychological theorist Erik Erikson in 1963 in his important work Childhood and Society. In this work, Erikson suggests that psychosocial development, the changing ways we perceive ourselves individually and in relation to society, occurs in eight stages—only four of which deal with childhood. The first of Erikson’s stages is “trust versus mistrust” and occurs from birth to 1 years. The child formulates either a trusting or mistrusting relationship to the world around it, based on whether its immediate needs are met. These needs, at this young age, generally have to do with satisfaction of physical cravings (food, sleep, and comfort) and for feelings of attachment.

The second stage of development Erikson called “autonomy versus shame” and doubt—occurring between 1 and 3 years of age. Here, young children learn to be independent and autonomous on the condition that they are adequately encouraged to explore their world and given the freedom to do so. On the other hand, children with overly restrictive or anxious parents who wield too great an influence over their children’s behavior, sti-