



Developmental Psychology

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The study of human growth and development throughout the life cycle, developmental psychology examines behavior from a biopsychosocial perspective. The psychology of development describes age-related changes in behavior, personality, and physiological maturation. Growth and development are assumed to be embedded within the social environment, and normative biological processes progress through a series of predictable stages that are influenced by socio-cultural and political phenomena.

Unfortunately, glbtq identity development has not yet been fully integrated into mainstream theories of psychological development, nor have other glbtq developmental issues been studied from a developmental perspective. However, recent work in this area, especially on the formation of sexual and gender identities, promises to further our understanding of the life experiences of glbtq people.

The Field

Developmental psychology assumes that human beings continue to grow throughout the life span, moving from infancy through old age. Development assumes "change," but not all change is developmental; the change must be permanent or have a lasting effect to be considered developmental. Development is generally assumed to unfold in a sequential manner. It is also presumed to have an "end goal" of maturation.

Human development moves through a progression of stages that are age-graded. Although these changes take place within individuals they are also interpersonal and transactional. The movement through each stage is affected by environmental variables. The ability to traverse each stage is a mark of successful development and has implications for an individual's level of functioning at later stages of development.

For example, while most humans will begin to talk by the age of three, contact with adults who encourage language and verbal interaction will increase comprehension and verbal acuity, as well as the clarity and sophistication of language skills. This contact may potentially have a lifelong impact on communication patterns, as well as on basic reading and writing skills, which can affect learning throughout the curriculum. Thus, children who are hearing impaired often have difficulties with speech and language development, while children who are raised bilingual often have increased ability to learn other languages when they are older.

Most models of development include an ecological framework that recognizes the impact of environmental and socio-cultural factors on biological development. Developmental psychologists have examined various aspects of human development including biological, cognitive, emotional, social, sexual, moral, and sometimes spiritual influences. Research into behavior, personality, and the sequence of normal development is often framed in a "nature vs. nurture" paradigm, analyzing how growth and development are affected by familial and educational influences, genetics, nutrition, poverty, and numerous other variables within a multi-dimensional perspective.

Age-graded influences include, for example, physical maturation, reproductive capacity, and the impact of aging on health and employment status. Human development is also influenced by social and historical factors, such as wars, epidemics, and political, technological, economic, and cultural changes. Often age-cohorts experience these factors in similar ways, such as children who lived through the Depression era, or adolescents who came of age during the counter-culture movement of the 1960s.

Additionally, individual human development is influenced by very personal, out-of-the-ordinary life experiences, such as life-threatening or chronic illnesses, infertility, or the death of a spouse or child.

There have been numerous criticisms leveled at developmental theories. Age has often been assumed to be a master-status, funneling people into life-stage expectations, as if people never marry in their seventies, become first-time parents in their fifties, or experience life-changing developmental processes regarding their sexuality past puberty.

Early research on human development examined male behavior only, and lacked cross-cultural comparisons. More recently, issues of gender, race, and sexual orientation have been acknowledged. This new acknowledgment of diversity contrasts with earlier studies that assumed that white heterosexual males were the baseline for normative development.

Conventional Models of Human Development

The first developmental theory in Western psychology is Sigmund Freud's psychosexual model, which viewed human development as a sequential process of libidinal progression. Freud outlined a five-stage progression--Oral, Anal, Phallic, Latency, and Genital that charted the movement of human sexual desire from various zones in the body to culminate in healthy adult heterosexual sexual development.

In the mid 1950s, Arnold Gesell charted development in terms of a series of physical, age-graded milestones in the normal growth patterns and motor and perceptual domains. Gesell believed these were consistent from child to child, and created an underlying blueprint of expected physical maturation.

Jean Piaget outlined a model of cognitive development, and examined how infants and children adapt to their environment through assimilating and accommodating new information. He developed a four-stage developmental overview of cognitive processes referred to as schemas, the underlying blueprint for how children move from private sensation to abstract reasoning.

Lev Vygotsky also studied cognitive learning processes, but focused more on the environmental and systemic influence of socialization on thinking processes. According to Vygotsky, a constructivist language development is key to cognitive and intellectual learning processes.

Influenced by Piaget's seminal theories, Lawrence Kohlberg explored moral development, with stages representing different levels of moral maturity. Kohlberg believed that human beings develop morals and ethics through a cognitive developmental process that matures over time.

Carol Gilligan has criticized Kohlberg's explanation of the development of moral reasoning because it does not take into account the particular ways that girls and women experience relationships. Females are socialized to value cooperation and attachment and therefore make moral decisions by weighing human needs differently than males do. Gilligan has been instrumental in shifting developmental theory to examine the "different voice" in which women speak, and to break down the hegemony of male experience and behavior as the norm for all human development.

Also influential in understanding how girls and women perceive the world and their relationships differently from men was Jean Baker Miller and the Stone Center at Wellesley College.

Erik Erikson expanded upon Freud's sexuality-based theories to examine the process of psychosocial development. Erikson viewed social development as the core element in human growth and maturation. He examined social tasks and normative transitional "crises" as the milestones of development. His stages of development address questions of trust, autonomy, identity, and generativity.

Urie Bronfenbrenner studied the environmental impact on human development. His ecological model examined the systems in which human development takes place, including the microsystem (the individual), the mesosystem (family and neighborhood), the exosystem (societal institutions), and the macrosystem (large and historical context).

Finally, Betty Carter and Monica McGoldrick have situated life span development within a familial ecological context, outlining the stages of family life development within which individual growth takes place.

Glbtc Development

All these conventional models of human development have either ignored lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender development or have seen it as pathological. Psychoanalytic theory in particular has seen the development of homosexuality and transsexuality as aberrant. Such development has been viewed as a "fixated" or arrested state of psychological development. In particular, male homosexuality has been linked to regression in the oral stage of development.

Numerous theories have assumed that homosexual and/or feminine males have overprotective and engulfing mothers and absent and abandoning fathers. Some theorists have proposed that homosexuality is caused by same-sex seduction or abuse in childhood, and/or conflictual or chaotic family environments. Behavioral theories have focused on the role of imprinting patterns or reinforcement of positive homosexual experiences in the development of homosexuality.

Kohlberg postulated a theory of gender identity acquisition based in cognitive processes. According to this theory, children by the age of 5 should recognize the differences between males and females, and identify "correctly" his or her own gender status as originating from his or her biological body.

Inadequate sex-role training has often been implicated as causes of both homosexuality and transsexuality. Many researchers are currently examining the role of biology, genetics, and biochemistry in the development of sexual and gender identity development, with particular focus on the role of perinatal factors.

Some gender theorists believe that sexual and gender identity are developmentally related to one another, and that transsexuality is an extreme example of the same pathological processes seen in homosexual development.

There is, indeed, some compelling evidence that cross-gender behavior in childhood may predict homosexual identity later in life. But much of the literature on sexual and gender identity development is difficult to evaluate or take seriously since the underlying ideology of much of this work has assumed that alternative sexual and gender identities are by nature pathological. Researchers have generally presumed a heterosexual outcome, and have regarded traditional male/female behaviors as the normative result of healthy psychosocial development.

Non-Pathologizing Models of Homosexual Identity

Only recently has the development of sexual and gender identities been explored from the perspective that alternative sexualities and gender identities might be healthy. Rather than regarding homosexual, bisexual, or transgender identities as aberrations from "natural" heterosexual development, some recent

developmental psychologists and sociologists have endeavored to understand the development of these identities from an ecological perspective that assumes these identities to be natural.

Vivienne Cass developed the first model of homosexual identity formation that was non-pathologizing. Cass proposed a six-stage process: (1) identity awareness, when the individual is conscious of being different; (2) identity comparison, when the individual believes that he or she may be homosexual, but tries to act heterosexually; (3) identity tolerance, when the individual realizes that he or she is homosexual; (4) identity acceptance, when the individual begins to explore the gay community; (5) identity pride, when the individual becomes active in the gay community; and (6) synthesis, when the individual fully accepts himself or herself and others.

Richard Troiden postulated a four-stage age-graded model of homosexuality identity development: (1) sensitization, the early feelings of being different; (2) identity confusion, teenage recognition; (3) identity assumption, the early process of acceptance that takes place in late adolescence; and (4) commitment, which is the acceptance of being gay and coming out to others. In Troiden's model, it is in this last stage that true intimacy can begin.

Sophie also outlined a four-stage coming out process. In her model there is (1) first awareness; (2) testing and exploration; (3) identity acceptance; and last (4) commitment.

Hanley-Hackenbruch developed a 3-stage model, which includes the stages of (1) prohibition; (2) ambivalence/practicing or compulsion/exploration; and (3) consolidation/integration.

Finally, Eli Coleman described a five-stage model that starts with (1) pre-coming out, which is the similar to Troiden's first stage or early awareness; followed by (2) coming out, or admitting the experience of homosexual feelings; (3) exploration, which is the beginning of sexual experimentation; (4) first relationships; and (5) identity integration. The last stage is the process of integrating the gay self with other aspects of one's personality.

It is obvious that there are great similarities among these theories, regardless of the various nomenclatures. However, not all individuals will recognize their own "coming out" experiences in the terms employed by these models.

Limitations of the Models

Literature on sexual identity development has assumed a stable, core sexual orientation; consequently, most of the work has been focused on gay men and lesbians. Bisexual identity development has been under-examined. It has been suggested that bisexuals have a similar trajectory as lesbians and gay men, except that the last stage involves a "continued uncertainty," although perhaps "flexibility" might be a better term. Models of transgender identity development are still in their early stages.

Developmental models of sexual identity have come under some scrutiny regarding their cross-cultural applicability. They are probably best understood as illustrative of modern gay and lesbian identities within contemporary Western culture.

Clearly, as homosexuality becomes more socially acceptable and youth come out at younger ages, these stage models will need to be adapted accordingly, since normal sexual identity development always takes place within a socio-cultural and environmental matrix.

The Need for Additional Work

Additional work in glbtq psychological development is needed, particularly work that goes beyond identity formation and explores other significant stages in the experience of glbtq people. Areas needing greater

study include how parenting, family formation, and aging processes differ for glbtq people, as well as questions about generativity for those choosing not to have children.

Developmental psychology's focus on the importance and impact of the coming out process is itself an indication of how glbtq people have been viewed as "outside" of normal developmental theory. What is needed is research on glbtq development that starts with the assumption that homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgender expression are normal and healthy developmental processes and that goes beyond the formation of identity.

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