Three Ages Project

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November 17, 2015

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We shall not lie, cheat, or steal, nor tolerate those who do.

Introduction

The three participants in this project were Nick, who at five years old is in early childhood, Louis, who is twelve years old and in late childhood, and David, who is a sixteen-year-old adolescent. Nick and Louis are brothers, and their interviews were conducted informally in their home, which was done with the intention of ensuring their emotional comfort during the interview process. Their house is very loud and bustling with activity in all corners during the day, as the brothers share it with their two parents and eight other siblings. Because of this, there were a certain number of distracting factors for the boys during the interviews. Their fifteen-year-old sister was also interviewed, but as she did not take the interview very seriously, her answers were discarded. David’s interview, which was done over the phone with no distractions, replaced hers. The siblings were chosen because the single family contained all three age groups and they were more than willing to help with the project, and David was chosen later because he was easily accessible. In all three interviews, answers were recorded through note-taking by the interviewer. All three boys are physically healthy and neurotypical, with no known developmental delays or mental health problems.

The questions asked of the three participants in this project were intended to assess their physical, cognitive, and social development, with a special interest in the development of career goals. The question targeting physical development asked participants about their physical growth and eating habits in the past year, specifically what and how much they ate. The cognitive question focused on moral development and asked participants about their thoughts on stealing. There was an additional question regarding theory of mind for the participant in early childhood. For the social component, participants were asked about how they chose their friends. Finally, the participants were asked what they wanted to be when they grew up and why. Based on theories of child development and the knowledge of the participants’ general well-being and their nurturing environments, all three boys were expected to give answers the interview questions that showed them to be generally in-line with achievements that developmental psychologists deemed typical for their age groups.

Nick

The first interviewee was Nick, age 5. For the physical question, he answered that he had not grown in the past year, he ate pasta italia (a caprese salad with pasta dish his mother makes), and that he ate a single serving at a time, which he demonstrated with his hands to be a portion roughly the diameter of his face. These answers, it is safe to assume, were not entirely accurate, which has to do with his still-developing cognitive abilities to consider abstract concepts like measurements. This inability to accurately estimate measurements indicates that he is, as is typical of his age group, in Jean Piaget’s preoperational stage of sensorimotor development.

In response to the moral cognitive question about whether or not it was bad to steal and why, he responded “Yes. It’s mean and you might mess [the things you have stolen] up.” This answer does not directly fit into Lawrence Kohlberg’s first stage of moral development because it does not include any mention of avoiding punishment, though this is the stage Nick could be expected to be in, given his age. Nick answered the theory of mind question incorrectly, indignantly declaring “That’s easy!” Theory of mind typically emerges before age five, so this incorrect answer was unexpected (Feldman, 2012, p. 256). It may have been due to confusion regarding the line of thinking displayed in the question, which would mean that the failure to correctly answer was due to a difficulty with receptive language and the cognitive ability to follow a hypothetical story. Difficulties in these areas were likely exacerbated by distractions in the interview environment, which would indicate that, like most children his age, Nick is still learning the skill of selective attention and is fairly easily distractible (Feldman, 2012, p. 186).

When asked the social development question, he said that he was friends with one boy because he invited Nick to his birthday party, and another because “he likes playing with me... [and] likes what I want.” After some confusion about what it meant to be similar to another person, he decided that he and yet another friend were similar because they both liked to color. It can be noted that all of Nick’s thoughts regarding his friends relate to shared activities, which is a perfect example of a child in William Damon’s first theoretical stage in developing friendships (Feldman, 2012, p. 334).

Finally, he said that he wants to be a teacher so that he can teach kids in school. This aspiration did not have any vocalized reasoning behind it or any assessment of what it would require, but rather seemed to be chosen because being a teacher “sound[ed] appealing,” which is how Eli Ginzberg described the decision-making process in the fantasy period of career selection (Feldman, 2012, p. 396). The fact that Nick chose this profession is likely because he started kindergarten this year, which is his first time being in a school setting. The fact that he wants to teach students suggests that he likes school and respects or admires his teacher, which a proponent of Erik Erikson’s theories of psychosocial development could surmise indicates that industry is winning over inferiority thus far in his school years.

Louis

Louis, who is twelve, was the most reticent of the three, and he seemed to find the interview awkward. He said that he had grown one inch and put on about six pounds in the past year, and that he ate a lot. When asked what he ate, he said he really liked pasta. It should be noted that the accuracy of his answers may have been slightly impaired by his simply trying to come up with an answer, which may have led to him saying the first thing he thought of. The growth spurt for boys in middle childhood begins around age twelve, and based on Louis’ weight gain it is likely that he will begin his soon (Feldman, 2012, p. 354). It is unlikely that he is in danger of becoming obese, despite what the weight gain and description of his diet alone might suggest, because he is at a healthy weight, and his diet and level of activity are the same as those of his siblings.

In response to the morality cognitive question, Louis said that stealing is bad and should be illegal because if everyone steals “everybody would be deceitful and nobody would own anything.” This fits into Kohlberg’s fourth stage of moral development in the conventional level, in which morality is based on social contracts agreed upon in order to keep society functioning.

Louis listed three boys as his friends for the social question. The fact that his best friends are all boys is consistent with the generality that children in middle childhood tend to make friends with people of their own gender (Feldman, 2012, p. 337). He said that he liked his friends because they are funny, devout, and laugh at his jokes, but that they are different from him because they like basketball more than he does. This seems to fit into Damon’s theorized second stage of the way children’s perceptions of friendship develop. This stage involves children making friends based on the personal qualities about people that they like, and on whether or not those people like them (Feldman, 2012, p. 334). However, this stage is thought to last on average until age ten, which is younger than Louis is.

Lastly, Louis said that he wanted to be an optometrist when he grows up, “because eyes are cool.” Based on that decision, he seems to be between Ginzberg’s fantasy and tentative periods of career selection. Based on his seemingly simple reasoning behind wanting to be an optometrist, it could be argued that he arbitrarily picked a career that he had been exposed to by needing to wear glasses. However, he also seemed to be considering the aspects of the profession, as he had obviously considered the fact that it involves working with and studying eyes, and he feels that that is something that would interest him. This consideration of the components of the career and of his interest in them is characteristic of the tentative period, suggesting that he is moving into it (Feldman, 2012, p. 396).

David

David has been quite short all his life, and now that he is in high school he seems to feel his slow physical maturation rather acutely, so he proudly said that he had grown a fair amount in the past year. At sixteen, he is still quite short for his age, although this is not out of the ordinary for his family, as his parents are both quite short and have a history of fairly slow physical maturation. He expressed an awareness of nutritional needs, saying his diet was “probably a little bit more fatty than it should be,” and that dinner, the main meal of the day in his family, usually consisted of a meat, vegetable and a carbohydrate. This awareness and perceptions about his diet likely were imparted on him by his father, who is a pediatrician. This exemplifies how in Urie Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological model, the microsystem, or the immediate family environment, impacts a child’s values and views (Feldman, 2012, p. 29).

David’s answer to the moral cognitive question about stealing focused on the importance of ownership and the fact that people should work earn the things they have. He used the Lockean phrase “right to property,” which he would have been exposed to in history class in school, in the beginning of his answer, and seemed to explore the concept’s importance out loud as he expounded on that initial answer, finally concluding that “if you didn’t use your own resources to get [something], then you shouldn’t be able to have it.” This does not fit neatly into any of Kohlberg’s statements, but it does show that he has reached Piaget’s formal operational stage, in which he is able to understand and discuss the very abstract concept of ownership.

His closest friends are people who go to his school, and many of them are in either show choir like him, in band, or are generally musically inclined. He says that he is friends with people whose personalities are compatible with his, people who he likes and who like him back, and people who talk to him and listen when he speaks. He also added that they are people he likes to spend time and joke around with, and who have similar ideas and opinions to him and each other, “but obviously not about everything.” David has reached Damon’s third stage of friendship perception, in which friendships are based on psychological closeness (Feldman, 2012, p. 334). This can particularly be seen when he says he and his friends have compatible personalities, and they listen to each other when they talk, which often involves discussing their ideas and opinions. It is clear that his relationships with his friends are focused not only around shared activities, but also around communication, shared values, and other psychological factors that David finds fulfilling.

Finally, David said that he does not know exactly what he wants to do, but he wants to have a career in the field of computer programming, possibly with a focus on security, which he said involves solving problems by creating computer programs. This interest developed when he was placed into a computer programming class last year, his freshman year of high school, due to a scheduling conflict, and found that he enjoyed the class and did well in it, particularly the parts concerning problem solving. He seemed excited about the idea of using skills he had learned on a computer to create solutions to problems. David is in Ginzberg’s tentative period of career development, as is expected of someone his age (Feldman, 2012, p. 396). He has had some experience in the field he is considering entering, and knows that he enjoys and is good at the aspects of it he has been exposed to, but he does not entirely understand the details of a job in the field; he has not had any real-world experience with it yet.

Discussion

The three boys’ levels of cognitive development seemed to be crucial to their answers to each of the questions. For the physical question, the participant’s cognitive development influenced their ability to understand what was being asked and give an accurate answer. This was particularly evident with Louis, the youngest boy, who was still in Piaget’s preoperational stage of cognitive development and could not entirely grasp the concepts of his own physical changes or amount of food intake. Cath Arnold suggests that there is even a link to cognitive development and actual physical development in her book *Observing Harry* (2003). She discusses how her grandson Harry’s physical development came about almost incidentally through his play, which became increasingly physically complex as his cognitive abilities progressed (p. 42). This impact of cognitive development on activity level is likely true of the participants in this project as well.

For the other questions, the boys’ cognitive abilities affected less their abilities to answer the questions accurately, but more the actual answers to the questions. That is to say, the other areas of development which the questions looked at are deeply tied into and dependent on cognitive development. The study of speech development stresses the idea that “as cognition goes, so goes language,” meaning that language can only develop as far as the brain has the cognitive ability to process it (Salley, 2015). This is true of many processes besides language. The boys’ abilities to consider their friendships required an ability to form concepts of others, their abilities to choose a career required an understanding of the world around them, and their abilities to construct an idea of morality required both. Perhaps most essentially, their abilities to consider all three of these ideas was predicated upon their ability to form a sense of self identity. None of this would be possible without the cognitive abilities to do so.

Recommendations for Nick

Nick is developing well so far. He is an active, imaginative, happy child, who is following in his seven older siblings’ footsteps in developing in a healthy and well-paced way. In order to ensure his continued physical development and well-being, he should continue to eat a healthy diet, and maintain the curiosity and active exploration of the outdoors that his older siblings have fostered in him. It will be important for his cognitive growth and continued sense of accomplishment in school that his parents make sure to take time and give positive attention to his schoolwork, and help him if he has academic difficulties in the future so that he does not feel neglected or as if he is struggling by himself. Especially at his current age, because of his tendency to be easily distracted, the best educational styles for him will likely be those that are active, hands-on, and engaging. The plethora of children around him has given him strong and early social skills in terms of his abilities to interact well with others with minimal conflict and to make himself heard in a group. These will undoubtedly be helpful for him socially in the future, though one thing that will be helpful to him in his development of theory of mind and of seeing the world from multiple perspectives is meeting new people who are different from people in his family and church, as up until he entered kindergarten, his social life has been fairly insular.

Conclusion

Theories of development are surprisingly evident in children provided that the observer has a firm grasp on the theories. It was incredibly interesting to observe the entire houseful of children when interviewing Nick and Louis, as their ages range from five months to eighteen years, so each stage of child development could be observed at play. It was also very interesting to see in real life what a vast difference exists between early childhood, middle childhood, and adolescence, particularly the revelatory development of metacognition.

There were a number of challenges in the interviewing process, which seemed to be different for each child. As previously discussed, Nick was distracted by other goings on in the house. While his interview was being conducted, his seven-year-old brother was very jealous of the attention, and repeatedly interrupted. There was also something of a language barrier, as the interviewer is not well-versed in interacting with young children, so the eighteen-year-old sister had to occasionally mediate to translate, as it were, a word that was too complicated into a simpler one that Nick could understand. This may have removed some of the scientific credibility from the answers, although without her intervention, Nick would likely have been unable to answer as well as he did, due to no fault of his own. Louis, as also discussed previously, was rather shy and did not seem terribly comfortable with the interview. His answers may, then, have been simplified somewhat because of his desire to simply come up with answers. The interview with their fifteen-year-old sister was marred by the fact that she saw the interviewer as a peer, and therefore did not take the interview seriously enough for her answers to even be used. David, meanwhile, answered the questions pensively and frequently paused to think and add onto what he had said. This is likely due in part to his cognitive maturity.

A follow-up study for these individuals would, really, look into the same areas with very similar questions in order to see how the participants had developed in these specific areas over time. New questions could perhaps be added that would seek to investigate behavioral characteristics that were noticed in the first interviews, or notes could be made to observe the behaviors more closely.

References

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