

Theory Notebook

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The subject of children's development is forever changing and evolving with new information coming all the time. There are five key theories and they are: Psychoanalytic, Behavioral, Cognitive, Evolutionary, and Contextual. Each theory has some important theorists that embarked on their respective theory's development. Most of the theorists were in their prime during the twentieth century, but their findings are still shaping the way educators and scientists look at children's development.

### Psychodynamic Theory

First up is the Psychodynamic Theory, which is basically all about the mind and individual thoughts of the child. The focus is on the child's inner thoughts shows how and why certain actions are performed or why the child homes in a certain persona or attitude. The theorist **Sigmund Freud** focuses on the three parts of personality (id, ego, superego) which is his *Psychodynamic Theory*, and his *Psychosexual Stages*. The parts of personality aren't completely developed till the early childhood stage (ages 3-6), but they have a huge influence on the child's development throughout the rest of their adolescence and adult life.

The Psychosexual Stages are broken up into five distinct areas: the oral stage, the anal stage, the phallic stage, the latency stage, and the genital stage. Each stage correlates with a different age range, and therefore lays out a foundation of the child's development. The *oral stage* occurs during infancy (birth-18 months), and during this stage the pleasure is focused with the mouth, hence the name the oral stage. Next would be the *anal stage*, which occurs during toddlerhood (18 months-3 years), and this stage is surrounded around the ability for the child to be able to control their bowel movements; so basically, this is around the time a child would be

“potty trained.” Then there is the *phallic stage*, this stage occurs during the *early childhood* (3 years- 6 years) and deals with the genital area and the child develops a fantasy of marrying their mother/father (Levine). During the *latency stage* (6 years-12 years), the child moves away from that fantasy developed while in the phallic stage. Also, in the latency age, the focus on the parents moves to the peers. Lastly is the *genital stage* (12 years- and on), which is where children tend to befriend children of the same sex, as well as the beginning of sexual attraction between peers (Levine).

Freud’s theory of Psychosexual Stages outlines the child’s inner thoughts throughout their growth, starting from infancy to adolescence, and frankly the child’s growth within his theory is enormous. Aside from Freud, there is the theorist **Erik Erikson**, who also has a set of stages, but they are called the *Psychosocial stages*. The Psychosocial Stages greatly contrast from the Psychosexual Stages, because they deal with social reactions rather than sexuality. During each age, there is a central conflict that must be resolved between biological development and the environment one is in (Levine). Unlike Freud’s theory, Erikson’s theory doesn’t stop at adolescence, it continues till later adulthood. To summarize Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages, it can be said that each stage is an important conflict that is brought up by one’s environment and social interactions but must be solved internally for one to continue development.

Although the Psychodynamic Theory is supported by two popular theorists, there are some criticism surrounding the theory. Most of the criticism surrounds Freud’s Psychosexual Stages, but there is still some criticism on Erikson’s Psychosocial Stages as well. Two of the main criticisms are that there is too much emphasis on sexual drive and that it is difficult to measure/define psychic energy. Another critique could be that the stages that are defined in both theories could vary in all children; they may not occur at the times mentioned.

### Personal Opinion

My opinion on the Psychodynamic Theory is that it doesn't consider some other factors that may influence a child's development; meaning that it is too systematic and specific. I believe that the child's environment has a bigger impact than Freud and Erikson emphasis on. I also agree with the critique of Freud that his theory has too much of an emphasis on sexuality. My opinion has not changed much throughout the course, because I still believe in what I thought when I first heard of the theory. I believe that other theories make more sense and have more of an impact on education.

### Behavioral Theory

Next is the Behavioral Theory which surrounds the behavior of the child, based on the environment surrounding the child. There are quite a few theorists within this theory, so there is a lot of information surrounding the topic. Basically, the theory is dependent on the fact on how children act and react to various things happening in their life. The way that they react shape and model them into who they grow into throughout the ages and stages.

The first theorist is **John B. Watson**, and he focuses on the idea of *classical conditioning*. Classical Conditioning is basically providing a stimulus (unconditioned stimulus) that evokes a certain reaction/action (unconditioned response) and then pairing the unconditioned stimulus with a neutral stimulus until the unconditioned response turns into a conditioned response. Therefore, the child will be learning a new response to something they originally didn't respond to in a certain way. Educators or parents could use classical conditioning to alter a child's negative behaviors.

Next is the theorist **B.F. Skinner**, who focuses on *operant conditioning*. Operant Conditioning is the opposite of Classical Conditioning, because Skinner believed that the child would be affected by what came after the behavior rather than what came before the behavior (Levine). Basically, Operant Conditioning can be described as applying a reinforcement after a particular behavior. So, this means that when a child performs a certain behavior a parent/educator can administer a punishment (reinforcement), whether it be negative or positive. But, Skinner believes that there is a certain amount of times one should have a certain schedule when enforcing reinforcements, because if the reinforcements are implemented too much, the child may not respond as effectively to the reinforcement. Another way that Skinner believes can be effective is ignoring a behavior, rather than punishing it while reinforcing a desirable behavior; this action is called extinction. This means that if a child performs an undesirable behavior, they may be looking to receive a reaction from the adult, but not paying attention to them will turn them away from repeating the action.

The last theorist within the Behavioral Theory is **Albert Bandura**, who formed the *Social Cognitive Theory*. Bandura supported the fact that cognition plays a big part in a child's behavior, which was something that Watson and Skinner both rejected (Levine). The Social Cognitive Theory explains how a child learns from watching someone else's actions. So, this theory could be used in the argument on how video games induce violent behaviors in children and adolescents.

There are some critiques of the behavioral theories, but one that sticks out is that Watson's classical conditioning can induce the formation of phobias; the phobias would be created from the conditioned response. But another critique could be that all of the conditioning and theories are all dependent on the child. One child may be able to react in the desired way, but

another child could react in an undesired way; it is all dependent on the cognitive and individual warrants of the child.

### **Personal Opinion**

Personally, I feel that the behavioral theory makes a lot more sense than some of the other theories, since it shows how children act and react to various situations. I lean towards Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory within the behavioral theories, because I have firsthand seen at my job how children react to other's actions. But, I still believe that some of the other theories have much more of an impact on the child's development.

### **Cognitive Theory**

The Cognitive Theory is clearly about the cognitive development of the child, and how the cognitive abilities of the child will affect their growth throughout adolescence. There is only one theorist and one theory within the Cognitive Theory, but that theorist has an enormous impact on today's education system. The Cognitive Theory focuses on a key point which is: the processes of the mind, that include thinking and learning.

The theorist within the Cognitive Theory is **Jean Piaget**, who created the *Cognitive Developmental Theory*. Piaget had created a complicated, yet very accurate description of how children adapt and organize the environment they live in. He believed that one organizes their understandings into *schemas*, which are concepts and their associations that are derived from past experiences. As one grows and encounters new things, they must decide one of two things to do; either *assimilate* or *accommodate* their newfound information. To assimilate information, the person will take in that information and compile it into an existing schema; but this information may or may not fit into the pre-existing schema. For example, if a child sees a dog, they create a

schema for dogs (therefore they know what dogs are and what they look like), but a young child, with the information from their pre-existing schema, may assimilate and consider a cat as a dog, although the two are vastly different.

Contrary to assimilating information, one may accommodate new information, which is where one sees or learns something new and develops a new schema for it. In the same example, if the child were to accommodate, they would instead create a new schema for the cat, and in turn call it a cat then and from that time on. The process of going between accommodation and assimilation is called equilibration, which is where one regularly assimilates information, but if that new information cannot be assimilated, it must be accommodated into a new schema.

Then, there is the theory of *Information Processing*, which breaks down how one understands and uses information in some key steps. To clearly organize and illustrate how one processes their information, the neural network model is used. The model shows specific concepts that are connected to higher-order concepts, and then connected to superordinate concepts (Levine). So, this means that bigger concepts are relayed into more specific concepts and then into the most specific concept it can get. The model looks like a chain with multiple nodes connected to the main concept. It can be visualized as the biological model, which is neurons and their respective axons and dendrites in the brain.

There is some criticism to the Cognitive Theory, just like all the other theories. Although the Cognitive Theory is supported by a lot of scientific data, theorists and scientists alike still don't know much about the brain. The brain, although it has been tested and researched countless times, is still very confusing. The cognitive abilities of children vary from child to child and the way that one will categorize information varies drastically. Another thing is that children with cognitive defects, such as Autism Spectrum Disorder, will not react or learn the same way as



children without defects, so theorists must take that information into consideration. Also, a critique for the Information Processing Theory is that it models the cognitive abilities of the brain like a computer, which isn't too likely; the brain is much more complex than a computer.

### **Personal Opinion**

I believe that the Cognitive Theory is one of the strongest out of all the theories because it takes into consideration how the child thinks and learns. As Piaget says, children are like "little scientists," which I personally agree with. To grow and develop, children must learn on their own. How children learn will really affect how they grow, because without a complex understanding of the outside world, they will never be able to be a functioning adult.

### **Evolutionary Theory**

The Evolutionary Theory mainly focuses on the fact that development is influenced by biological factors, which are genes, and how those genes react to the environment. The main theorist who established and started the Evolutionary Theory was *Charles Darwin*, who developed the idea that human behavior is adaptive and that it will persist, influenced two other theories: *Ethology* and *Sociobiology*.

Ethology was developed by the zoologist *Konrad Lorenz*, who found by studying animal behavior that animals would follow their mothers immediately after birth. Although this was studied in animals, animals are the closest and most biologically similar organisms to humans, so it can be hypothesized and studied that children do similarly. The behavior that Lorenz observed is called imprinting, which is where the offspring adaptively follows the mother because of her protection and provision of food. The way this translates into human behavior is that children,

when born, must have skin-to-skin contact with their mother. This skin-to-skin contact brews bonding between the two, just like when the offspring animals follow their mothers.

Sociobiology was created by the biologist *Edward O. Wilson*, and Sociobiology shows how evolution has played a role in social interactions. The theory of Sociobiology explains that people are more likely to protect, help, and give to those related to them due to their genetic connections. This theory can show how children act negatively towards those not related to them since they primitively believe that they must protect and fight for their family. The Evolutionary theory basically encompasses how one will react and act to specific situations due to their genetic predisposition.

The main critique for the Evolutionary Theory is that it is difficult to connect humans to animals, since there hasn't been concrete evidence to support the claim. With more research in the future, the claim may become true, and the theory may become more prominent, but at this time, the theory is merely useless. Sociobiology is much more relevant and useful than Ethology, but even Sociobiology doesn't have much of an impact on a child's development. Sociobiology only encompasses a specific instance in one's life; protecting and caring for their loved ones. So, it can be noted that the Evolutionary theory doesn't provide much information on how children develop throughout the ages and stages.

### **Personal Opinion**

I believe that the Evolutionary Theory as a whole is useless, it doesn't provide much concrete information on how children develop. Lorenz's Ethology is completely useless and shouldn't be considered as a part of children's development, since it cannot be completely connected to children; it is mainly only applicable to animals. Sociobiology is somewhat more

applicable to children's development, but still, it doesn't apply enough to how a child develops; it just explains why they act the way they do in certain situations. Therefore, I think the Evolutionary Theory is the weakest of the five theories.

### **Contextual Theory**

The Contextual Theory is basically a combination of the three main theories (Behavioral, Cognitive, Psychoanalytical), because it explains the development through cognition, personality, physicality, and sociality. There are two main theorists within this theory that combined these concepts and they are *Lev Vygotsky* and *Urie Bronfenbrenner*.

The theorist Lev Vygotsky developed the *Sociocultural Theory*, which encompasses the fact that society and culture promote cognitive growth within the child. According to Vygotsky, when a child interacts with the culture, they then internalize what they learned, and it then becomes a part of their own individual thinking (Levine). Vygotsky theorized that an adult would be able to guide and push a child to learn more than they would be able to do on their own. With this thought, Vygotsky created the *zone of proximal development*, which is where a child is at a certain point with their own individualized learning compared to their potential to learn with an adult guiding them or with collaboration with peers. Therefore, educators and parents must realize what the child already knows, but they must create a plan to be able to take the child to the next level. This concept is termed *scaffolding*, which is basically the plan or "structure" of what the adult will do to support and take the child to that next level. As the child progresses, the scaffolding will "come down" and the adult will start to step away; as the scaffolding "comes down" the child will become closer to their peak of development.

Next is the theorist Urie Bronfenbrenner who created the *Ecological Systems Theory*, which is his own model of how the environment influences a child within a set of four systems. These four systems all influence each other and evolve as a child grows older and climbs towards maximal development. The systems start small with the *microsystem* and grow bigger until they reach the *macrosystem*. The microsystem, which is one of the most impactful systems, is the face-to-face interactions one will encounter in their immediate surroundings, such as parents and peers. Next would be the *mesosystem*, which is the connection and interaction of two components from the microsystem. Then, there is the *exosystem*, which is anything that one does not directly encounter, but it still affects them in some way; for example, a parent's job may affect a child, even though they may never physically go to their parent's workplace. Lastly is the macrosystem, which is the outside world and cultural norms that affect one's everyday life. Another system that is separate from the model is the chronosystem, which is the "dimension of time," therefore it compiles everything during one's specific age and time (Levine). All of these different systems combine and influence the way a child develops throughout their ages and stages.

There are some critiques for the Contextual Theory, and the theorists within it. The biggest criticism for the theory is that the systems mentioned in the Ecological Systems Theory are too specific and that they may not connect as Bronfenbrenner may believe. Another thing is that some children may learn or develop better learning, not by learning with an adult, as Vygotsky has determined. This theory can receive some of the same criticism as the Behavioral, Cognitive, and Psychoanalytical theories since it encompasses parts of each.

### **Personal Opinion**

I personally believe that the Contextual Theory is one of the strongest theories along with the Cognitive Theory. The Contextual Theory compiles the best of the main three theories, and I think that's what makes it so compelling. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory is the best theory within the Contextual Theory because it is obvious to anyone that adults and peers help one form their cognitive abilities. The environment surrounding us influences us in such a profound way, which is what both Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner both visualized as they formed their theories.

### References

Levine, L. E., & Munsch, J. (2016). *Child Development from Infancy to Adolescence: An Active Learning Approach*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.