Lifespan Development: A Kaleidoscope of Change

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Lifespan development was viewed as a kaleidoscope, changing with every turn or period of the lifespan. Each phase of human development builds on previous development analogous to the turning of the kaleidoscope. A changing allocation of resources affects each turn of the kaleidoscope and each phase of development. The changing allocation of social support throughout the lifespan can impact development both positively and negatively. Plasticity in development can occur to compensate for genetic deficiencies or deficiencies in the environment at all stages of development. The social support systems and the ability of the individual to accommodate to the physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes occurring within the changing environment determine the success of development throughout the lifespan.

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Lifespan development is analogous to a kaleidoscope. With each turn of the kaleidoscope, there is a different image for the individual to see. With each phase of the lifespan, the developing individual must adapt to the changing environment. As each turn of the kaleidoscope builds on the previous image, each phase of development builds on the outcomes of the previous phase of development. The lifespan will be illustrated in terms of the impact of past and present development, by incorporating lifespan theoretical frameworks, contemporary research and the knowledge and views of this learner from a General Psychology Specialization.

Lifespan development is described as a changing allocation of resources whereby individuals are faced with gains and losses which require the individual to adapt to these changes. As a person progresses through the phases of development, adaptation takes on the forms of growth, maintenance and regulation of loss. Childhood is often thought of as a time of growth, middle adulthood as a time of maintenance and late adulthood as a time of regulation of losses (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). During this course there has been an evolution, much like a kaleidoscope. It has been an ever changing allocation of knowledge with each bit of knowledge building on previous knowledge. The most significant shift in knowledge has been surrounding the issues of social support and plasticity. In drawing those conclusions, the most profound theoretical impact has come from Balte, Erickson, Bronfenbrenner, Ainsworth, Bowlby, Vygotsky, Baumrind and Ryff.

A kaleidoscope requires proper construction so that it will work in the prescribed manner and if the process of construction does not proceed as planned, the intended image will not be seen. After construction, proper use of the kaleidoscope is required in the environment. The
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construction of a human requires that biology provide the appropriate blueprint so that the environment can then support the subsequent development that proceeds after conception. An alteration in the genetic information of the parents can affect the development at conception as can the prenatal environment. Conception and prenatal development provide an illustration of the influence of nature (biology) and nurture (environment). While there is a changing allocation of influence by each, conception and prenatal development provide the first glimpse the impact the environment has on supporting the genetic blueprint that genetics provide. The socio-cultural environment has to provide support from conception until death for healthy development.

In prenatal development, teratogenic exposure in the forms of nutrition, malnutrition, drug intake, maternal illnesses, maternal age and outside environmental hazards have been shown to have both short term and long-term influences on development both prenatally and postnatally. Of the teratogens, prenatal stress of the mother appears to have the greatest impact on prenatal development because it has been shown to impact other teratogenic exposure including nutrition, cigarette smoking, exercise and the use of both legal and illegal drugs (Cannella, Graham, DeVincent, Schneider, & Mayer, 2008) with the end results being premature delivery, low birth weight or potential death. Exposure to alcohol prenatally has become quite common and Ernest Abel (1980) indicates that of 1,000 births in the United States, one or two will be born with Fetal Alcohol Syndrome. While some of these children will suffer physical malformations, the most common long-term effect of prenatal exposure to alcohol is long-term cognitive delays. The cognitive delays can include mental retardation as well as behavioral problems. This exposure can impact physical, cognitive and psychosocial development (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). A mediating factor in teratogenic exposure is social support both
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familial and relational which leads to healthier behavior on the part of the mother thereby equating to healthier development for the fetus.

During childhood, social support takes on many forms but the most profound relationship is between the child and their immediate environment. A sense of social support in childhood will have an impact on all future development in all domains of development. While an individual’s development can remain plastic, it can be posited that the past impacts the future and changing the trajectories that are established in childhood can occur but will require real effort. The ability of the individual to adapt to the ever changing socio-cultural environment can be impacted by the earliest involvement with either a supportive or a non-supportive environment.

Bronfenbrenner’s Bioecological theory provides an illustration of the impact of the child’s microsystem and the bi-directional impact of this environment in which the environment impacts the child and the child impacts the environment. The child is impacted by not only the family but by any other environmental entity the child has direct contact with evidenced in Bronfenbrenner’s Theory (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). In early childhood, the child must come to view their environment as a trusting, responsive, safe base in which they can develop cognitively, physically and psychosocially. Erikson’s Theory (as cited in Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009) postulates that a sense of trust, autonomy, and initiative are developed in early childhood and are the earliest forms of the quest for identity which continues throughout a person’s life. The trajectory of these stages is impacted by the social support that the individual is exposed to.

The theoretical frameworks of Bowlby, Erikson and Ainsworth (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010), support the correlation of the child’s social environment and their feelings of self-efficacy (their working model of “self), their cognitive abilities and their relationships with
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others. Secure attachment is established when the environment is warm, sensitive, supportive and responsive to the needs of the child. This allows the child to develop trust, autonomy and initiative and to use the parent as a safe base in which future healthy development can occur. In converse, when either the parent lacks the knowledge or the child lacks the ability to exhibit proximity promoting behavior, insecure attachment may result. This impacts the way the child’s sense of self and future relationships in their environment as stated by Bowlby and Ainsworth, (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010, p.189-90). Not only does this environment impact the development of self-concept but impacts cognitive development as well.

Piaget’s Theory (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010) illustrates the impact interaction between the individual and their environment has on cognitive development. Knowledge is constructed through processes of adaptation, assimilation and accommodation and is not something that “happens” to the individual but is a process that the individual actively participates in. A supportive environment in which the individual can effectively and efficiently “explore” allows the individual to adapt to the ever changing environment and to use prior knowledge to build on future knowledge. This requires the establishment of social support in the micosystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem. It allows the individual to progress from using sensory information to using complex logic and abstract thinking.

Social support plays a significant role in development in childhood. Vygotsky’s Sociocultural Theory has provided a shift in thinking and a more profound recognition of the impact of language on cognitive development. Further the use of Vygotsky’s scaffolding, beginning in childhood, sets the stage for scaffolding to be used in further stages of a person’s life. The use of scaffolding allows the creation of “a zone of proximal development” in which learning occurs in a supportive social setting whereby the individual is prompted by a person
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with advanced cognitive skills. As the child ages, scaffolding requires the parent to modify the techniques being used so that there can be a transfer of responsibility for learning to the child (Neitzel and Stright, 2003). An emotionally and cognitively supportive environment is necessary so that the child learns self-regulation allowing them to become an active participant in the experience of learning. The outcomes, both immediate and long-term, are advanced problem solving skills, cognitive self-management, the ability to adapt to environmental changes related to the individual’s microsystem, increased self-efficacy beliefs and academic competence (Neitzel & Stright, 2003).

A critical element of cognitive development, according to Vygotsky’s Theory (as cited in Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009) is language. He posits that language advances both thinking and learning. Individuals that have had a supportive setting in which to develop their verbal, reading and writing skills are those individuals that also will be advanced cognitively and psychosocially. A young child’s success in learning their language via speaking, writing and reading will often experience academic success. This potentially will increase their interaction with peers as well as increase their feelings of self-efficacy. In converse, if there is not academic success or relational success early in a child’s development, the impact will not only be immediate but long-term.

The home environment, the interaction of child and parent, provides a crucial component in the acquisition of language and reading skills. Weigel, Martin and Bennett (2006) emphasized the role of the parent in both early reading skills and in early language skills. Activities that were occurring in the home consisting of shared reading activities, availability of books, engaging in age appropriate activities including telling stories, drawing pictures, reciting rhymes correlated with the child’s early reading skills. A parent who provided a supportive environment
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in which literacy and language enhancing activities were the norm had children who were more advanced in speaking, writing and reading skills. In converse, those parents who provided a more punitive environment in which literacy activities were not encouraged resulted in a child’s disinterest in literacy skills (Weigel, Martin & Bennett, 2006).

A genetic propensity for intelligence only provides a starting point, the social support of the environment is necessary for successful development. The early home “learning environment” can impact the future learning environment of the individual. A connection between home and school enhances the academic success of the individual at all levels of education. The child’s belief in the importance of education begins in the home, based on the interaction and involvement by the parents (Weigel, Martin & Bennet, 2006). A changing allocation of resources in learning then occurs. The home is most crucial to the child’s learning until the child is of mandatory school age and then the school may become a more effective and powerful influence. The social support that the child receives from family will still serve as a powerful microsystemic influence by the child’s immediate environment, and serves to enhance both academic success and cognitive advances.

Middle childhood and adolescence serve as a time when according to Balte’s Theory, development is “influenced by the historical and cultural context” of the developing individual (as cited in Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009, p.18). Not only is the individual influenced by the familial environment but a changing allocation of resources in the form of social support. Peer influences become a significant force in middle childhood but climax in adolescence. The familial environment and the peer group (cohort) can be complimentary or contradictory influences. The past familial environment is often predictive of how successfully the individual will meet the challenges of middle adulthood and adolescence, in which development of industry
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and a stable identity are critical elements of psychosocial development. According to Erikson, (as cited in Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009) the developing individual must learn the survival skills of their culture resulting in feelings of competence in middle childhood. In adolescence the individual is faced with the challenge of achieving a stable identity resulting in a choice of occupation, adopting a set of values to live by and the development of a sexual identity.

The achievement of industry and developing a stable identity will not occur easily unless the individual experiences familial and relational social support. The developing child is attempting to navigate the changing “kaleidoscope” of physical, cognitive and psychosocial changes. Their “tool box” of available resources to deal with this ever changing kaleidoscope is compromised without a supportive social environment. Susan Harter states (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010), that development of self-concept in middle childhood and adolescence is related to scholastic competence, athletic competence, physical appearance and behavioral conduct. This is all occurring at a time when the individual’s focus turns to their bodies. Puberty is the period of development when primary and secondary sex characteristics are being developed and become apparent. While the physical changes occur earlier and may be more visible for females, the impact of this physical development has ramifications on the other domains of development, specifically psychosocial development (Broderick & Blewitt, 2010). A supportive social setting is necessary for the successful navigation of the competing domains of development.

Both the parenting style and practices of the parents will determine whether the social environment will be supportive, punitive or neglecting for this navigation and quest for identity in adolescence. Darling and Steinberg (1993) as well as the theoretical frameworks of Baumrind and Macoby and Martin (as cited in Darling and Steinberg, 1993, p.487 & 491) describe
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Authoritative parenting as a parenting style that consists of emotional support, high expectations (high demandingness), appropriate regulation (control or contingencies for parental reinforcement), allowing for the achievement of autonomy in a warm, nurturing environment where communication is bi-directional. The parent uses love and logic in their interactions with their child/adolescent and while control is utilized and expectations are high, they are realistic. The goal is to encourage the child to understand the consequences of their behavior for themselves and others. Pro-social behavior is modeled and expected by the parent. In contrast, authoritarian parents are high in demandingness but low in responsiveness and put control above all else. The permissive parent is high in responsiveness but low in demandingness, providing limited boundaries or expectations and expecting the child to monitor their own behavior and the neglecting parent and low in both categories. Conceptually the parent has to serve as a socializing agent and recognize the individuality of the developing child (Darling & Sternberg, 1993).

An adolescent’s quest for identity and their desire for acceptance from their peers often create a conflicted relationship with their parents. Steinberg (2001) indicates that “adolescents benefit from having parents who are authoritative: warm and accepting of their needs for psychological autonomy and it is not just what the parents do that matters but the emotional context in which they do it”. This parenting style makes effective socialization possible as the parent respects the child and the child is receptive to the control by the parent. The adolescent is allowed to exert their autonomy in a safe and supportive environment in which mistakes are permitted but acknowledged and learning results. The parent is aware of the child’s behavior and is involved in all aspects of the adolescent’s life. This is not in an intrusive or enmeshed manner but in a loving, sensitive and supportive manner. The home continues to be a safe base
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for exploring the changing microsystem and allows for healthy adaptation to the changing environment. The outcomes were adolescents who were socially advanced, cognitively competent, mature and academically successful (Steinberg, 2001).

Adolescence provides another illustration of a changing allocation of social resources. Both parents and peers can serve as socializing agents that produce both positive and negative outcomes. Evidence supports that parents have a greater impact on academic achievement while peers have a greater impact on the engagement in risky behavior or in converse the abstaining from these behaviors. The increased time that adolescents spend with their peers in comparison to the amount of time spent with parents provides a greater opportunity for peers to influence daily activities (Cook, Buehler & Henson, 2009). This is an area of development where plasticity is possible. While there is a changing allocation of social support, ie greater impact from the peer group, a supportive familial relationship can result in the parents continuing to have significant positive impact on their adolescent. Plasticity can occur when both parents and adolescents remain flexible and acknowledge the changes in the microsystem of both the parent and the adolescent.

A childhood that provides a safe, supportive and responsive social environment translates into an adulthood in which the individual is capable of achieving love and generativity. Erickson stated (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010) that intimacy is achieved through a trusting, loving, affectionate relationship often achieved through relationships with a partner. He further stated that generativity is most often achieved by a successful work environment but also through relationships with children or the community. Roberts and Bengtson (1993) report that parent-child affection in childhood related to a young adult’s psychological well-being. The young adult with a past affectionate and supportive environment will make an easier transition into being a
spouse, parent and worker than those who did not receive sufficient parent-child affection in their childhood and were more likely to suffer psychological distress. While there is plasticity in the development of the young adult who was not reared in an affectionate environment, Roberts and Bengtson (1993) found modest support for work and marital relationships serving as mediating factors.

There is impact of past and present social settings on the development of a healthy intimate relationship in adulthood. The ability of the individual to engage in a healthy intimate relationship is related to the type of attachment to the parent that was established in childhood (Feeney & Noller, 1990). While there is plasticity in achieving intimacy, it has been shown to be problematic when secure attachment has not been achieved in childhood. Feeney and Noller (1990) found that securely attached individuals sought out intimate relationships that were trusting and enhanced their feelings of self-confidence. In contrast, insecurely attached individuals either sought out relationships where intimacy was avoided or they became totally enmeshed and dependent on their relationships. In both insecure situations, the relationship ended up being unhealthy. There was increased potential for negative outcomes and illustrated the result of inadequate social support.

Not only is intimacy a critical element of a healthy adulthood but Greenberg and Sorenson describes “psychosocial maturity in terms of individual adequacy, interpersonal adequacy and social adequacy” (as cited in Winfield and Harvey, 1996, p.4). The impact of the developing environment is evidenced in the educational and vocational choices of the young adult which can be impacted by their socioeconomic status as well obstacles that have occurred due to the impact of their microsystem. It is this learner’s belief that social support has a powerful impact in the individual’s college success. The correlation between past and present in
A KALEIDOSCOPE OF CHANGE evidenced in Strage and Brandt’s (1999) whereby “a student’s grades, confidence level, persistence, task involvement, and rapport with their teachers were generally predicted by both current and childhood levels of parental autonomy granting, demandingness and supportiveness”. James Marcia postulates (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010), that identity achievement is not easily achieved without a supportive family setting. Identity achievement is plastic and can be achieved later in life but once again the social setting will be paramount in this achievement. Given the changing economy socio-cultural environment, individuals may find themselves navigating through these stages of identity achievement more than one time in their lifetime.

Achievement of identity, intimacy and generativity often serve as factors that determine healthy development in middle and late adulthood. At a time when developmentally there is a changing allocation of resources in terms of physical, cognitive and psychosocial development, social support still remains high. Middle and late adulthood serve as times when a person often reexamines and reevaluates their life. Some view this time as a potential time for crisis due to youthful dream going unachieved and youthful appearance diminishing. Weaver (2009) postulates that this is a time of new possibilities and “with age our knowledge, emotions and the way we behave mature”. The individual has to be an active participant in this on-going quest of self-acceptance and personal growth despite a lessening of abilities. Relationships are changing due to children leaving home, the aging of parents and the filial responsibility resulting in changing of roles and the diminishing of cognitive and physical abilities.

There is an obvious connection to past and present aging when one reaches middle and late adulthood. Aging occurs based on primary and secondary aging. The first we have no control over as it appears to be a gradual inevitable process that begins in early adulthood. The latter we have control over as it results from our behavior and the abuse we expose our bodies to
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(Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009). Just as prenatal development is impacted by environmental factors of exposure to stress, drugs inappropriate nutrition and lack of exercise, so is adult development. So, cognitive and physical delays may be inevitable forms of the lifespan but there is plasticity in the way the individual approaches these losses. Baltes’ theory (as cited in Freund, 2008, p.102) states that “development is best characterized as multidirectional, encompassing gains and losses”. In conjunction with Balte’s Theory, Freund (2008) indicates that the use of selection, optimization and compensation most effectively allow a person to navigate through the gains and losses associated with adulthood. The use of selection allows the person to prioritize and focus their attention, optimization provides focused attention of the individual in the pursuit of their goals and compensation allows the individual to accommodate in any area of diminished capacity. This model allows the individual to remain an active participant and not just a recipient in their changing micro, meso, exo and macro systems.

Relationships can remain intact both marital, familial or friendships with the correct amount of compensation. The efficiency of cognitive functioning may show declines but wisdom may compensate for the reduction in fluid intelligence. Sternberg (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010, p.498) defines wise people as both “creative and intelligent”. They are able to maintain stability but also change when needed. Physical changes create the most obvious changes in appearance and in organ reserve but once again can be compensated through selection and optimization (Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009). According to Erikson, (as cited in Broderick & Blewitt, 2010) regulating the losses of late adulthood and maintaining a connection of the past to the present is evidenced in the individual who can achieve a sense of integrity and be able to face their death without regret.
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The biggest shift in personal views of lifespan development occurred in relation to social support and plasticity specifically related to middle and late adulthood. One could accurately postulate that the reason for this shift is related to this learner being in middle adulthood with a parent in late adulthood. Critical to that shift in the view of lifespan development is Ryff’s scales of well-being. Ryff provides a scale (as cited in Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009) which includes the dimensions of self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life and personal growth. These dimensions of well-being can be evident throughout one’s life and will not be present in middle or late adulthood without the social support in all previous stages of development. The individual is capable of achieving these measures of Ryff’s dimensions of well-being if they are realistic, flexible and successfully assimilate and accommodate the changes in their environment whether physical, cognitive or psychosocial in nature (as cited in Papalia, Olds & Feldman, 2009).

As a practitioner and scholar, knowledge of the impact of social support related to lifespan development is critical in working with students and clients. Educators have an obligation to provide a supportive educational setting for students of all ages and life situations. Mental health professionals also need to provide supportive settings for their clients who are navigating social problems that may be related to their past or present development or their chronological age. This environment has to provide avenues (scaffolding) for them to increase the sense of social support for them personally and potentially for their children or to deal with the lack of social support they may have encountered in their pasts.

Eventually the kaleidoscope stops working. Eventually the individual dies. The ability of the individual to experience integrity at the end of their life and to be able to accept their
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mortality is moderated by the sense of social support they have encountered at all stages of the life span.
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References


References


