

Tracing Child Development Perspectives across Generations: How Time Shapes Childhood

Author's Statement

This essay is a culmination of my work in 85-221, Principles of Child Development. I had the honor of working with Dr. Carver throughout the course and revision process, as she nominated it for publication. The course focused on biological, cognitive, and social development, placing emphasis on the evolving nature of developmental psychology and the ways child development takes shape in different cultural and historical contexts. The objective of the assignment was to see how ideas of child development shift across generations, and reflect how these ideas have sculpted my development and the development of those around me.

So far, my studies at CMU have focused on global processes of change and inequality, and on positioning these processes in the hyper-locality of a community. I chose to take psychology classes to understand how our decisions are guided by the social scaffolds around us, especially when we're children. To me, this was a way to understand the intertwining paths of my family and myself. To give a voice to families that are so often studied for interventions, but are not a part of the research groups and policy makers that hold decision making power.

Tatym

Introduction

Child development and the way we think about a child's development is heavily context dependent. Perspectives on child development fluctuate between cultures, and they are influenced by gender, life experiences, and the ideals and values placed upon child development, which can change with each generation. This paper investigates the latter: how different generations in a family view large debates about how children develop. It seeks to explain how differing child development ideologies across generations influence the development of our friends, family, and ourselves.

This research draws upon various theories of child development. Jean Piaget's Cognitive Theory and stages of development detail distinct stages of thinking, in which children interact with their environment to construct a mental model of the world. Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory explains that children learn from observation, imitation, and modeling of behavior that is then reinforced by rewards or social motivation. Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory of Development encapsulates the socially mediated process of cognitive learning as more knowledgeable individuals guide a child through learning skills that they can't learn independently. The last important theorist to note is Erik Erikson and his Psychosocial Developmental Theory, where a person's development is dependent on overcoming eight successive crises, the first starting in infancy where a child either learns they can rely on their caregivers or they develop feelings of mistrust as their needs are not consistently met. This theoretical grounding informs the paper's Discussion section, which explains surveys and interviews in relationship to these leading perspectives on developmental psychology.¹

Methods

This study uses a large pool of data compiled from surveys administered by undergraduates in Dr.

¹ See *How Children Develop, 6th Ed.*, by R. Siegler, J. Saffran, N. Eisenberg, and E. Gershoff, 2019, especially: Piaget, p. 120; Vygotsky, p. 146; Erikson, p. 320; Bandura, p. 324.

Sharon Carver's Spring 2023 Principles of Child Development course (85-221) at Carnegie Mellon University (see Appendix A). For the initial surveys, class members asked participants for their perspectives on thematic debates in child development, placing their responses on a scale from 1 to 5. For example, if the question asked was, "To what extent do you think that children play an active role in their own development?" the responses ranged from 1, meaning "others determine development," to 5, meaning "children have considerable influence." The answers reflect the spectrum of the debate in question. The key debates in child development included whether development is more inherited or acquired, how influential the sociocultural context is, how important individual differences are, and if others determine development or if the active child has a considerable influence. After the initial surveys, individuals conducted in-depth interviews with a subset of their own survey participants, repeating the same foundational questions in an open response format, along with two additional questions (see Appendix B). These additional questions were individually designed by each student and were intended to add nuance to the interview, while still relating to the four debates on the mechanisms of child development.

This methodology may have influenced respondents. Depending on the interviewer's relationship to the respondent, respondents could be hesitant to give "wrong answers," especially if they have limited formal knowledge about child development. The surveys also most likely resemble the population of the class. The data pool is likely to come from more educated and higher SES backgrounds and resemble the demographics of CMU (which is majority Asian and White), decreasing the external validity. A final limitation of the study is that one cannot draw any causation from these results, but just note correlations.

Results

In the survey data pool, there were 351 respondents, 198 female, 148 male, 1 non-conforming, and 4 preferring not to report their gender. The responses were heavily skewed to younger participants, with over 100 responses falling within the birth-years of 1998-2005. This trend most likely occurs because peers of similar age were the easiest for class members to survey. Our oldest respondent was 102 (born in 1921) and the youngest was 14 (born in 2009).

The surveys and interviews were designed to allow for easy examination and correlation between age (generation) and where they fall on the debate spectrum. Other factors were also considered, such as the number of siblings or children that the participant has, as these variables could influence an individual's ideas on child development. The large pool of participants also allowed for a wider variety of responses that may be more reflective of the general public.

The results of the class study show that there is a small negative correlation ($r = -.20$) between birth year and the perceived importance of the active child. This finding means that younger participants believed that the active child played less of a role in a child's development. On the other hand, there was a small positive correlation ($r = .17$) between birth year and the importance of sociocultural context on a child's development, so younger participants placed more emphasis on the role of sociocultural context.

Another result of the study noted a small positive relationship ($r = .13$) between number of siblings and the importance of individual differences in a child's development; the more siblings one had, the more likely they were to place importance on individual differences.

On the nature vs. nurture debate, most of my own survey responses indicated that respondents were uncertain which had more influence on a child's development. My results were inconclusive, with only slightly more respondents agreeing that "a child's behaviors and abilities are acquired rather than inherited," which reflects the general results of the data pool.

Discussion

Survey Findings

I think these survey findings reflect the generational change of a broadening world, especially in the case of our class specifically. At CMU, and a great number of colleges today, students meet others from drastically different backgrounds and are more aware of how their own sociocultural context and that of others have influenced who they are today. This tendency may be reflected in the observed positive correlation between younger ages and the importance placed upon the sociocultural context of a child. Additionally, younger generations have had access to the internet since growing up, and therefore have had far more access to knowledge outside of their own sociocultural contexts and how different environmental factors influence development.

Survey participants with siblings also tended to see individual differences as playing a significant role in development. This might be because children with more siblings see how their siblings develop differently because of their individual differences, even though they are raised in the same environment. However, a child without siblings may not have this same reference point.

Survey participants had varied responses to the nature versus nurture debate with no clear correlations. However, after more in depth interviews, the results suggest that most participants agree that both nature and nurture work together to influence a child's development. Surprisingly, two of

my friends pointed out serial killers as their example (noting that serial killers are more often a product of their environment and not an “it runs in the family” inheritance). While these examples are outliers, they illuminate common ideas of development as a combination of a child’s environment and biological factors.

Interview Findings

Some other contrasts between generations that I discovered from my own interviews were ideas about social development. While I interviewed my grandma, for example, a theme that emerged is how her own upbringing influenced how she raised her children later in life. She was raised to behave “the right way” and avoid making mistakes, and she raised her children by implementing strict rules to ensure her children understood her expectations. However, she noted in hindsight that unconditional love was the most important factor in a child’s development. Even when children rebel, she said, unconditional love allows children to learn from their mistakes, and only after her children were grown could she notice this was more important than making sure a child is “well behaved.”

Generational Change

Across generations, there seemed to be a shift in ideas surrounding children making mistakes or “misbehaving.” When I interviewed my friend, they noted that being able to make mistakes was important to learning (both cognitively and socially). For example, they received harsh punishments for bad grades, and while this worked in the short term, they often struggle now with heightened expectations and anxiety surrounding schoolwork. Additionally, my grandma noted an example of my aunt letting her children make mistakes in a way that was not familiar to my grandma. My grandma taught her children to be more obedient, partly by making sure they did not make mistakes. However, for my aunt, that experience transformed into embracing mistakes made by her children,

so that they could learn from them together. This generational change reflects several social theories, such as Bandura's Social Learning Theory. Understanding that making mistakes is a part of learning allows caregivers to guide their children through concepts and skills they cannot learn on their own. Additionally, Erikson's Psychosocial Theory supports the idea that encouragement from caretakers, teachers, or peers can lead to initiative and feelings of capability, compared to feelings of guilt that might arise when caretakers doubt a child's abilities or intentions.

Nature vs. Nurture

Even though older generations tend to believe in the active child's influence more than their environmental circumstances, my grandma noted in her interview that "your environment changes a lot; you have to have the support of your genetics and environment to be successful." This idea connects with a course theme that nature and nurture interact. Even though most participants were unaware of formal developmental theories, their ideas echo those of Piaget, Vygotsky, and more, emphasizing that environmental support works together with innate maturation to help a child learn about themselves and the world around them.

Child's Active Role

As for the child's active role, as noted earlier, younger generations tend to place less emphasis on a child's active role than older generations. I believe a strong undercurrent to this trend is that older generations were raised believing in the "American dream"; or, at the very least, this applies to my own family's beliefs. Because of their investment, they believe that hard work leads to success. However, talking to my grandmother on this topic raised my own development as an example. I was born into poor circumstances, with a single mother in a financially strapped position. My grandma recognized how that situation can heavily influence a child, while also noting how children pick their own friends, interests, and life pursuits to make a better life, saying: "I see that a lot in you. You just had your own strong personality traits that overcame your negative upbringing." The survey pool from the class reflected a similar ideology, with most respondents agreeing that a child's

active role is very (4) or extremely (5) important to development.

Sociocultural Context

As for sociocultural context, as noted earlier, there was a small positive correlation between a respondent's birth year and the emphasis they place on sociocultural context. The results for this survey question were heavily skewed towards sociocultural context being incredibly important to development; I found similar emphasis among my interviewees.

Many of my interviewees reflected upon their individual struggles with their sociocultural context. One was a first generation American and college student, and another grew up with very limited resources. They both discussed how they tried to make circumstances better for their children while also passing down values from their own social or cultural context, which for both of these respondents included grit, resilience, and hard work. My grandma also noted that "here, they [children] pretty much do what they want" but "in other places, they have to do the best for their family." Her reflection shows that older generations do recognize how different cultural contexts and values (like individualism vs. interdependence) can influence development, even though they might have less experience with different cultures compared to younger generations.

Individual Differences

The class survey results indicate that most respondents saw individual differences as significantly important to child development, and those with siblings were slightly more likely to affirm this view than those without or with fewer siblings. One interviewee highlighted how individual differences can influence a child's experience while growing up in the same environment. An example brought up in an interview with a friend was that their brother was diagnosed with ADHD at age 12, while my friend (raised and socialized as a girl) did not get diagnosed until college. The interviewee noted how this impacted both their and their brother's development in different ways. This might illuminate why individuals with siblings place more emphasis on individual differences, as they

easily see the contrasts in how their siblings were raised or treated despite growing up in the same household.

Additional Interview Findings

In addition to the standard interview questions (see Appendix B), I created and included two of my own:

1. What do you think is the most important aspect of a child's development?
2. How has your own development influenced your views on child development as a whole (i.e., how you think children should be raised)?

I really wanted to know how their foundational understanding of child development factored into their own experiences. I found that interviewees placed importance on aspects of child development that they found were lacking in their own childhood. Their ideas of child rearing were heavily influenced by wanting to provide what they were missing as children, while also preserving important values passed down from their parents. For example, one person noted that attachment was the most important aspect of child development because they did not have a secure attachment growing up. Alternatively, another person said individual autonomy was the most important because they experienced dismissal of their own autonomy in childhood, such as not being respected or listened to just because they were a kid. My last interviewee thought that unconditional love was the most important thing. Her own childhood was strict, and she said those rules set in place guide children for the rest of their lives and so she used many of the same rules. In hindsight, however, she said that "the feeling" of unconditional love is what allows children to come back to their guiding rules even when they mess up or "rebel."

Conclusions

This study illuminates similar aspects of my own development and the development of those

around me. As previously mentioned, my own personality and active choices gave me a better life than I could have experienced. Alternatively, I was an only child until I was 12, so I can see the ways that individual differences between my friends and family with siblings closer in age has shaped their views a little differently than mine. I also saw that older generations dealt with a lot of strict control from both their own development and the attitudes at the time, such as “behaving the right way” or “following rules.”

From this experience, I think that changing attitudes have combined with child development knowledge to help us understand that parenting for “obedience” or “perfection” can do a lot more harm than good. The study also revealed that younger generations are much more likely to coach a child through their emotions, instill a growth mindset, and allow children to make mistakes and be there to help them learn from them. This survey has also shown the importance of a person’s sociocultural context and how it shapes ideologies about childhood, especially when it comes to values that a culture has and how this can change over time.

My own development and that of my family and friends shows that incremental healing and learning after childhood is incredibly impactful in how the next generation is raised. For example, my grandmother and mom both had kids pretty young, and were still developing themselves when they started raising their children. They both dealt with a lot of stressors and trauma from their own childhoods, as did my friend’s parent, who I also interviewed. In the case of my grandma or mom, they did not have the time to heal or learn new coping mechanisms to pass on to their children, so often they ended up passing down the approaches used to parent them. In contrast, my friend’s parent intentionally took the time before having a child so she could be fully prepared; she healed herself before becoming a parent. I, too, wish to have time to explore myself, heal from some of the hard aspects of my childhood, and develop stability before I become a parent. I hope to break some

of these generational cycles, while continuing to learn from myself, others, and, I hope, to give my child (in the far future) the best possible outcomes.

Looking at child development through a continuously changing lens helps us acknowledge that child development will never be guided by one single principle, rule, or idea. Child development is context dependent. While ideas are passed down through a culture, culture and knowledge is never stagnant; it is always adjusting and readjusting, just like raising a child.

Appendix A: Initial Survey

Where Do You Stand?

85-221 Principles of Child Development Spring 2023

Professor: Sharon M. Carver, Ph.D.

Student Name:

Subject First Name:

Birth Year:

Gender:

Number of Siblings:

Relationship to Student:

Number of Children:

The questions below ask you to reflect on several basic debates associated with the process of child development. Use the rating scales below each question to indicate where you stand on the issue. Try to give an example from your own childhood or from your observations of children to show why you selected the response.

1. To what extent do you think children's behaviors and abilities are determined by what they inherit or by what they acquire through experience?

1 2 3 4 5

Mostly Inherited

Mostly Acquired

Example:

2. To what extent do you think that children play an active role in their own development?

1 2 3 4 5

Others Determine Development

Children Have Considerable

Influence

Example:

3. To what extent do you think that the social and cultural context in which a child grows up has an influence on development?

1

2

3

4

5

Not At All Influential

Extremely Influential

Example:

4. To what extent do you think individual differences are a part of the process of child development?

1

2

3

4

5

Not At All Important

Extremely Important

Example:

Appendix B: Interview Questions

Generations Interview Questions

85-221 Principles of Child Development Spring 2023

Professor: Sharon M. Carver, Ph.D.

Invite three family members / friends from at least two different generations to reflect on their experience with our course themes, as they relate to their family. Ensure each individual that you will keep their responses confidential among family and friends; specific responses will only be shared with your course instructors.

After asking the general question related to each theme, ask interviewees to give examples from your childhood or theirs, to note a pattern in their family, or to cite a striking case from the development of another individual close to them. The form below can be adapted for notetaking by hand or used for typing the responses as the interview occurs.

Student Interviewer:

Subject:

Relationship to Student:

Date of Interview:

1. How do genetics and environment together shape development?

Examples from your development or mine / our family / a friend:

2. How do children shape their own development?

Examples from your development or mine / our family / a friend:

3. How do a family's social and cultural context influence a child's development?

Examples from your development or mine / our family / a friend:

4. How do children become so different from each other?

Examples from your development or mine / our family / a friend:

5. From where have you learned about children, child development, and – if applicable – parenting?

Examples from your development or mine / our family / a friend:

Additional Question A: What do you think is the most important aspect of a child's development?

Examples from your development or mine / our family / a friend:

Additional Question B: How has your own development influenced your views on child development as a whole (i.e., how you think children should be raised)?

Examples from your development or mine / our family / a friend: