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Life as an Infant: Shedding Light on Erikson, Vygotsky and Piaget

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Abstract

This paper explores three theories on child development, focusing specifically on infants. These include Erik Erikson's Psychosocial theory, Lev Vygotsky's Social Culture theory, and Jean Piaget's Cognitive Development theory. This paper examines each theory and provides a real-life example in support of each theory from my observations at the McMillan's Child Care Center. This paper was originally submitted for a service-learning Human Development psychology class.

Key Terms:

- Child Development
- Cognitive Development
- Psychosocial Development
- Developmental Theories
- Vygotsky
- Piaget
- Erikson

Christina Barnes-Matthews is a Psychology major with a minor in Chemistry from Carson, CA. After graduation in 2012, Barnes-Matthews plans to attend graduate school for a master's degree in counseling and ultimately become an addiction counselor. Barnes-Matthews' research interest is applying real world applications to the development of small children. Her recent research includes working with Dr. Annette Iskra and Dr. Jeremy Cohen studying how humor effects posttraumatic growth in Black survivors of Hurricane Katrina.

As an infant, the world is a new and exciting place filled with things to explore. Three theorists, Erik Erickson, Lev Vygotsky, and Jean Piaget, have explained how humans develop throughout their lifespan. Erikson's theory on Psychosocial Development, explains how we grow both psychologically and socially at various stages and ages and the conflicts we face. Piaget and Vygotsky both examined cognitive growth during human development. Piaget theorized about the individualistic level of cognitive development (how the child makes sense of their world and experiences), while Vygotsky takes into account the social aspects of learning (the experiences of a child including their social surroundings). This paper takes Erikson's, Vygotsky's and Piaget's theories and applies them to explain the development of young toddlers between the ages of 10 -12 months. The toddlers all attended McMillan's Child Care Center in New Orleans, Louisiana and were being observed for a service-learning Human Development psychology class. In all examples, the toddler's names have been changed for confidentiality purposes.

Observation of Theories

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development consists of eight different developmental stages that one passes through in a life-time. The first stage that infants go through is the stage of trust versus mistrust. In this stage, infants develop trust "by the infant's caregiver[s]...feeding and the caregiver's response to the infant's cries" (Faris and McCarroll, 2010, p. 14). If infants cry because they are hungry, and their needs are not met in a timely matter or even at all, they begin to mistrust the world. This is because the world that infants know is not adequately meeting their needs and is now deemed unsafe. Once a child develops mistrust for the world, uneasiness around new people and strangers develops. Since the baby now believes that extending the world to other people

will continue the pattern of not being safe, the baby is not considered to pass through the trust versus mistrust stage. An infant successfully passing through this stage will get all needs met in a timely manner and have no reason to believe that the world is scary or unsafe and less likely to be leery of strangers than a child who has not passed through this first stage of psychosocial development.

At McMillan's Child Care Center, I worked with a 10 month old girl named Jane. Jane showed signs that she had not passed through the trust versus mistrust stage. For instance, when a stranger walked into the room, especially if the stranger looked at Jane or walked in her general direction, she would scream and cry. Although she could walk, Jane reverted to crawling and reaching up to one of the caregivers for comfort. The caregivers expressed to me that they did not want to always pamper Jane because they wanted her to get used to strangers, and not always feel the need to get picked up or held because strangers are not always scary. The main problem that I had with Jane was that I couldn't comfort her because she reacted to me as she would other strangers. I was able to speak to her mother who said that Jane did not like social situations and her mother felt like she would eventually outgrow her fear of strangers. Another prime example of Jane showing her mistrust towards strangers was when she was on the playground with one of the caregivers. Jane was walking and playing and was generally happy. Then the older children came on the yard and she immediately had a tantrum. Since Jane was not always comforted when she became terrified this may have been the result of her mistrust of the world. However, Jane is now 11 months old and is starting to become less afraid. She is moving toward the trust side of the trust versus mistrust stage.

As Jane became accustomed to me, she let me get near her and do things like fold her blanket

or give her a pacifier. After a few weeks, I knew Jane's level of trust in me increased because she let me wipe her face and pick her up when she was scared. Jane also had fewer tantrums when a stranger was near, which may have been from her becoming more trusting. Possibly, she had realized that not all strangers are mean and scary. The caregivers told me that Jane was having better days. Instead of crying all day she smiled and laughed and was a happier baby. Her behavior indicated that she was on her way to successfully passing through the trust versus mistrust stage. Perhaps, as Erikson says, her primary caregiver is more consistent; therefore Jane was easing into trusting the world.

There are other ways to assess a baby's development beyond Erikson's theory of psychosocial development. Piaget and Vygotsky have also developed theories to determine a baby's cognitive development. Piaget's theory of cognitive development is a theory that takes into account how humans try to understand the world. Piaget theorized that we understand the world through schemes: "infants build up schemes of action through circular reactions in which the infants repeat similar activities to build increasingly complex organizations of action and perception" (Fisher and Hencke 1996, 205). We develop these beliefs by assimilation and accommodation. Assimilation is the process of adding new information to previously formed schemas and accommodation is changing information (Block, 1982, p. 282). There are different stages of Piaget's theory of cognitive development. The first stage is the sensorimotor stage. This stage is broken down into six sub-stages: the simple reflex stage, first habits and primary circular reactions, secondary circular reactions, coordination of secondary circular reactions, tertiary circular reactions, and the beginnings of thought. The infants that I worked with were going through the secondary circular reactions stage and the tertiary circular reactions stage. During the secondary circular reactions stage, the concept of object permanence occurs.

Object permanence is when a child knows an object still exists even though it is out of sight. The tertiary circular reaction stage is marked by infants starting to observe the consequences of their actions (Feldman, 2009, pg. 108-111).

At the daycare, there was a 14 month old boy named Kevin. While Kevin and I were playing with building blocks, I hid a block from him and Kevin went looking for it. After he found it, he returned to playing with the blocks. Kevin tried to stack the blue blocks and tried several different ways to figure out which way of stacking worked best. Kevin then tried to stack the larger red blocks. Through trial and error Kevin realized that the red blocks will not stack like the blue blocks could. Kevin learned from the consequences of his actions about how the different size blocks could be stacked. Based on the explanation of the secondary circular reaction stage and the tertiary circular reaction stage Kevin successfully achieved master object permanence and passed through the part of the first stage of Piaget's Cognitive Theory.

The third theory applied to my service-learning experience is Vygotsky's Social Culture theory. Vygotsky believed that cognitive development is a product of social interaction and not just individual performance. Vygotsky believed that cognitive development "is the distance between the actual developmental level ... and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance" (Gauvain & Cole, 2005, pg. 38). This means that a child has an understanding of the basic material and can learn more advanced material with assistance from an adult or someone who has already mastered the skills. Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a gap between what a child can do on his/her own and what the child can accomplish when aided by an adult.

At the daycare, I was playing with Tristan, who was about 16 months old. We were working on putting a farm animal puzzle together that

included three different animal pieces. The animals that Tristan had to arrange were a pig, a sheep, and a horse. When doing the activity by himself, he tried to put the horse piece in the sheep slot; he continued to try before I helped him. I then showed him where the horse piece went. At first he did not understand where to put the horse and continued to trying the horse in the sheep slot. I continued to show him where to put the horse piece, and after a few repetitions he started to put the horse piece in its correct place, even after I stopped helping him. We repeated the same actions with the pig and the sheep pieces and after awhile he was able to do the entire puzzle. A couple of days later, Tristan was unable to complete the whole puzzle by himself. However he could fit the sheep piece and it was apparent that he learned part of the puzzle. As ZPD suggests, I had to help Tristan a few times before he was able to completely grasp the concept. However, it was seen that even after a few days, the gap between what Tristan knew and what I was attempting to teach him became significantly smaller.

Personal Reflection

These three theories have shed a new light on infants for me. Before my service-learning at the daycare, I assumed that all babies really did was eat and sleep. However, this is far from the case. Cognitively, I didn't realize that by twelve months babies can walk, talk, and explore their environment. After learning about Vygotsky's theory on Zone Proximal Development, I was eager to try and teach the infants everything that they could comprehend. I taught Tristan a puzzle and another child a new word. Viewing the children through the eyes of Piaget, I noticed how the infants interacted with objects in their environment. It also made sense why babies frequently repeat actions. For instance, when children repeatedly shake a rattle and hold it slightly different every time, they are learning how things work and the consequences of their actions.

I also have realized that infants can get antsy or scared in social settings, as suggested in Erikson's theory. I used to think that babies simply did not like me since they pulled away from me and sometimes even cried. However, I now know that the reactions babies have may be because of how they trust or mistrust the world. I no longer underestimate the abilities of children as I did in the past.

Conclusion

Working with babies can be a joy but understanding their development makes it a lot easier. Knowing these three theories before working with a child can help daycare workers and teachers with their expectations of children. For instance, knowing Erikson's theory will allow caregivers to know how children react to the world, whether they are trusting or not and how to ease the child into the trusting stage. Understanding the two cognitive theories can clue caregivers into seeing if the child is thriving or if the child is becoming stagnant. This would be a reason to explore if the child has a failure to thrive that is due to lack of cognitive stimulation or lack of emotional stability which can easily be reversed with care and stimulation for the child.

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