

# The Value of Theories

The first lecture provides introductory background for the study of six major theories of human development. The lecture begins with a statement of the major objectives of the course.

A quick test is given to allow students to assess where they stand on major issues regarding human development and to see how we all have naïve theories about the nature of human nature.

Then, the lecture discusses the value of scientific theories for understanding development and human nature and the criteria for judging whether a theory is valuable.

The lecture concludes with an overview of the course, which will first cover the history of concepts of children leading up to the major theories, then go on to examine each of the theories of Freud, Erikson, Bowlby and Ainsworth, Bandura, Piaget, and Vygotsky.

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- There are three main objectives in these lectures on 6 theories of development:
- **A.** The first objective is for the student to grasp the value of developmental theories by becoming familiar with six theories that have had, perhaps, the greatest and most widespread influence on our current conceptions of child development and, more generally, on human nature.
- **B.** The second objective is for the student to learn more about the sequences and processes of human development by learning what each of the six theories can teach us.
- **C.** The third objective is for the student to develop an ability to judge critically the value of the different theories, as well as their weaknesses, and see where they converge with and differ from each other.

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- It is necessary to formulate and use scientific theories to understand human development.
- **A. Human development is defined as the sequence of steps and processes that bring about change and reorganization in humans from conception through the entire life cycle.**
- **1.** Human development applies to growth (such as height and weight), as well as increases in specific abilities and knowledge (such as increases in vocabulary size), but it mainly focuses on reorganizations in thinking that change the way one approaches tasks in one's life.
- An example of one such reorganization, which occurs between the preschool and school years, is the child's emerging capacity to consider another person's viewpoint or perceptions of others at the same time that she considers her own viewpoint and perceptions.
- This shift in strategy or capacity is a major reorganization in children's thinking and makes possible the ability to make accurate predictions about others' intentions, to compete effectively, and to cooperate effectively with others.

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- **2.** These reorganizations that we call development occur in many domains of our lives (for example, neurological, physical, cognitive, emotional, and social).
- **3.** Although developmental change occurs throughout the life span, most change occurs during childhood and adolescence; thus, child development is a large subset of all of human development.
- **4.** We can't fully understand our human nature without understanding our origins and how we develop. The principles of development seen in childhood tell us about our human nature at whatever age we are.
- **5.** The study of human development comes from many disciplines, including medicine, biology, education, anthropology, and philosophy; however, developmental psychologists have contributed a large portion of the research and theorizing about human development. The six major theories that we will study came primarily from the field of developmental psychology, and they deal primarily with development from conception to maturity in young adulthood, although many of them explain development in adulthood as well.

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- **B. Scientific** theories are systematic explanations that unify various observed phenomena and facts.
- **1.** Developmental theories provide metaphors, models, or formulas for understanding and predicting developmental processes and how development will progress under a given set of circumstances.
- **2.** No theory provides a perfect explanation or model of reality, but without theories, we do not make progress in our understanding and cannot use the facts we have gleaned.
- **III.** Students will take a quick test to determine where they stand on some major issues of development. (For questions, see Lecture Twenty-Four.)
- **A.** The issues are concerned with the basic nature of children and the relative importance of nature and nurture to our development.
- **B.** We all have naïve theories about children and human nature, even without knowing about the major theories in the field of developmental psychology.
- **C.** Students can see if their naïve theories will change by the end of the course.

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- **IV.** Scientists use certain criteria to judge what makes a good theory.
- **A.** One can ask several questions about a theory. When the answers are usually “yes,” one can trust that the theory is good. The student should refer to this list as a guide for the evaluation of each theory.
  - **1.** Does the theory reflect the real world of humans, particularly children?
  - **2.** Is the theory supported by convincing evidence?
  - **3.** Does the theory explain the past and predict future outcomes?
  - **4.** Can the theory handle new data and discoveries?
  - **5.** Does the theory stimulate new research and discoveries?
  - **6.** Is the theory clearly understandable, and does it simplify rather than complicate the world?
  - **7.** Is the theory self-satisfying?
- **B.** Developing a useful theory does have costs, however.
  - **1.** Though a theory can organize and clarify one’s conceptions, it can also bias one’s outlook and blind one to additional facts.
- **2.** A theory can oversimplify the reality of the world.

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- The rest of the course is organized along the following lines:
- **A.** First, we will discuss the history of child study leading up to the development of scientific theories. Second, we will discuss each of the six theories in turn. Along the way, we will refer to the historical context of each theorist and compare the theories we have already discussed. Last, we will make some final comparisons and draw some conclusions regarding these theories.

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- **B.** The six theories that we will cover are the following:
- **1.** First, we will discuss Sigmund Freud's psychodynamic theory, the earliest of the six.
- **2.** Second, we will discuss Erik Erikson's psycho-social theory of development across the entire life span, which was a modification and expansion of Freud's theory.
- **3.** Third, we will discuss the integrated attachment theory of John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth, which was a split with Freud and specifically dealt with the development of close relationships.
- **4.** Fourth, we will discuss Albert Bandura's social learning theory and the importance of observational learning in development.
- **5.** Fifth, we will discuss Jean Piaget's cognitive-developmental theory and learn how it revolutionized the study of child development.
- **6.** Sixth, we will discuss Lev Vygotsky's cognitive-mediation theory, which provides an important complement to Piaget's theory.



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- REFLECT
- At the beginning of this course and based on what you already know, how would you define a scientific theory and what criteria would you use to judge whether a theory was sound and valuable?