Developmental Self-Study

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My Psychological Development in Three Stories

Before I begin to analyze my own psychological development, I will explain each of the five psychological theorists involved herein in brief. First, Piaget attempted to organize psychological development into four stages. The first stage, the sensorimotor stage, describes those from birth to two years of age. These children are understanding the world based on their senses and physical actions. The second stage, the preoperational stage, describes those from two to seven years of age. These children are understanding the world through symbols of words and images beyond their immediate senses and actions. The third stage, the concrete operational stage, describes those from ages seven to eleven years of age. At this point, the children are beginning to reason with logic even when the things in question are not physically present. The final stage, the formal operational stage, describes those from age 11 and on. These thinkers are able to make inferences and to reflect on their own thoughts. (Santrock, 2007, pp. 40-44)

Our second psychologist of intellectual development is Vygotsky. Vygotsky paid careful attention to how social experiences affect psychological development. Rather than considering stages, Vygotsky considered knowledge collaborative and cumulative through culture. His idea of one's zone of proximal development is especially well-regarded in that there is an optimal level of difficulty at which one can learn, and this optimal level is when one cannot learn alone but can master with a more-knowledgeable other (Santrock, 2007, pp. 40-44).

Our third psychologist to consider is Erikson, who had a similarly stagelike idea to Piaget. There are a few greatest differences between Erikson and Piaget. First, Erikson argues that psychological development is not just done in childhood but all throughout one's life. Secondly, Erikson's stages have a bit more flexibility, for Piaget's stages must be completed and never returned to. Meanwhile, Erikson's stages have effects on all the other stages for each stage thereafter. Additionally, one naturally returns to Erikson's stages throughout one's life. Thirdly, Piaget states his stages as more intellectual while Erikson's are psychosocial. For instance, the first of Erikson's stages incorporates something akin to Bowlby's attachment theory in that children in their first year of life must develop trust if they do not want to avoid a lifelong expectation of mistrust and fear. Another example is that the fourth stage describes an idea not unlike Vygotsky's zone of proximal development in that children must find success in possible but challenging tasks with the help of more-knowledgeable others (Santrock, 2007, pp. 151-153).

Our fourth psychologist is Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner proposes a means to identify the effects of one's ecosystem on their development. He divides this ecosystem into increasingly larger systems with less direct capabilities of effect. Although they may be less direct, they can arguably create just as much developmental change. The microsystem, the most direct and small of the systems, consists of the activities, social roles, and interpersonal relations in one's immediate environment. For example, the microsystem might include one's home, job, and family. On the other side of the coin, the macrosystem consists of the overarching pattern of the other systems characteristic of a given culture or subculture (Bronfenbrenner, 1994).

Gilligan, our fifth and final psychologist, describes ethical development. Gilligan presented a resistant force to the ideas of her contemporaries. She was frustrated with the idea that there was one correct moral code accepted by the field of psychology and that that moral

code was the one of men and institutional justice. In examining Kohlberg's two-person sample size of Jake and Amy, in which Jake prefers to accept the law's punishment if it means saving his loved one's life. Meanwhile, Amy's offer, which Gilligan calls the answer of women, is that one can circumvent the law with enough conversation and compromise. All in all, it comes down to the idea that women care less about the rules, they care more about relationships and problem solving. Because of this flexibility, nonviolence, and empathetic consideration, women have better morals than men. (Gilligan, 1982).

Allow me to tell the first of three stories to illustrate these five theories of human psychological development. When I was very young, my mother scarcely ever left the house without me. This was especially the case because my father was often away on business. However, partly out of necessity and partly out of experimentation, my mother drove off to the store, leaving me alone with my father. I was young enough that my sister had not yet been born, so I must have been no older than 21 months at this point, certainly old enough to walk around and get into trouble. However, when my mother came home, I promptly ran into the wall adjacent to the stairwell entrance. I then proceeded to cry until I passed out because I had "hold your breath" syndrome. Because I was in what Piaget calls the "sensorimotor stage" of my psychological development, and because I could not physically sense my mother, it appeared to me that my mother had disappeared for good. My mother was the person in whom I had placed so much of my trust. She provided me great physical comfort and assuaged my fears, just as Erikson describes in his stage of Trust vs. Mistrust. In some ways, I see this as a strength for my psychological development, and yet in others I wonder whether having another trust bond may have been more beneficial. If we look at this from the point of view of Bronfenbrenner, my ecological systems were small at every stage. My microsystem was my house, and within my

house, only those places that were not cordoned off by baby gates. It included my mother, father, and dog. Because my microsystem was so small, so was my mesosystem. Only my parents' relationship and my parents' relationship with my dog were within my mesosystem. Sure, my father's workplace existed within my exosystem, but my relationship with my father at the time mattered far less than my relationship with my mother. My mother hardly left my side, so this event was the first time that an exosystem relative to my mother had ever come up. If we consider this event from Vygotsky's point of view, one could say that my mother was my primary social conduit through which I learned culture. Perhaps without her presence, I felt lost as if everything was outside my zone of proximal development because she was the only person I saw as a more-skilled and more-knowledgeable other. Since this time, I have had the opportunity to expand my social circles, and thus my ecological systems. In doing this, I have improved my flexibility in responding to situations, the stability of my emotions, my autonomy, and the ability to notice and control my breathing (is this a Piagetian stage or a piece of cultural knowledge learned from my social life?).

This second story relates to my Piagetian preoperational stage, Erikson's stage of initiative vs. guilt, Vygotsky's social development theory, and Bronfenbrenner's ecological system theory. In the summer before entering Kindergarten, my family went on a bit of a trip to visit some family in Maine. While there, we visited the L.L. Bean store in Freeport. In front of the store, there is a large boot. I cannot imagine they encourage children to climb it, but I had the autonomous initiative to do so anyway. Once upon the great boot, I began to announce something like, "Hello, everybody! There will be a great show in just a few minutes. Prepare to be amazed!" Little did they know… there was no show. However, as a crowd began to form, I began to realize the pickle that I had put myself in. Thus, I began to recite some stories from my

favorite television show. Much taken by surprise, the crowd applauded, probably out of equal parts amusement and confusion. Upon some reflection, this may be at a turning point between two of Erikson's stages. Because I was autonomous in my decision-making to some extent and because my parents had not been too restraining of me, I had the comfortable development into this moment of initiative. In this case, my healthy development of autonomy may have encouraged me to stir up the crowd. That I did not back out on account of the responsibility that I had given myself certainly proved that I was developing without much shame, doubt, or even guilt. Piaget's preoperational stage is a bit more difficult to tease out here. It is possible that because of this Piagetian stage I did not connect the possibility that my announcements would draw a crowd and create responsibility for myself, for my thoughts were on the joy of drawing attention more so than on the meta-analysis of what might happen on account of that attention. Meanwhile, I relied heavily upon my close social connection to the television program to get myself out of the tough situation. I am sure that Vygotsky did not have television in mind when he introduced his theory, for television was hardly a popular concept in 1930s Russia. Still, if not for the more-knowledgeable-others that were my television companions, such a preposterous idea would have seemed to me to be outside of my zone of proximal development, for I had certainly never seen any of my close friends or family members do such a thing so spontaneously. It was positively cinematic! The positive reaction of the crowd probably did me some good, for it reinforced the success necessary for development in this Eriksonian stage and for understanding the bounds of my zone of proximal development. While Bronfenbrenner had a better chance of including television into his theory, I am unsure whether he would have forecasted that television might be part of a microsystem. Even still, my reliance on that

relationship as I introduced these exosystemic strangers into a more intimate system proves its importance in my development.

For the last of my three stories, I would like to discuss a controversial moment within my life. I remember the moment well. My friends and I were playing some trading card games beside the basketball court. One of my friends was a bit overweight and his face was breaking out. Because of his appearance and our geeky activity of choice, he was being targeted by three bullies, who were hanging on the other side of the fence, two of whom I considered acquaintances of mine. I was confused and conflicted as I witnessed this interaction, and after a bit of time I stood up and asked these fence-mounted bullies to stop, "or else." When they continued, I walked around the fence and pulled down the pants of one of my two acquaintances. I was then penalized; I was asked to write letters to everyone involved, including the teachers whose classes I missed. This moment is definitely one to reflect on Gilligan's theory of psychological development. Was I acting as Jake? Did the wrong that I committed make right the wrong that was being done to my friend? Or was I acting as Amy? Did I avoid the greater wrongs, like violence, through a sense of care, compassion, and personability? According to Gilligan, as a boy, I was more likely to have performed as Jake would have. While this event definitely lies on a spectrum between Amy and Jake, I certainly could have avoided the "pantsing" altogether if I had attempted more communication with the fence-mounted bullies and an adult too. Thus, Gilligan may have considered me additional evidence for her case study of two. However, this reflection, this metacognition as part of the formal operational Piagetian stage, has me realizing that I have ethically and psychologically developed since this point, when I was merely 11 or 12 years old. I am sure that if I had spoken up for my friend or walked away with him that any negative consequences for any of the parties involved would have been

avoided. If it were to continue, I may pursue justice on behalf of my friend, certainly, but, more likely, I think I would have a serious conversation with the bullies, who were friendly enough with me to begin with, that could have resulted in long-term success in the relevant relationships. Over time, have I transitioned from Jake-inclined morals to Amy-inclined morals? Is it possible that my reaction at the time and my reflection of it now has to do with my change in identity and my comfort in my identity now that I lacked when I was 12? My identity was based around my friendships, which were clearly in conflict at this moment. At this age, my motto on video games was “adiuvo et servo,” i.e. “I assist and I protect.” Thus, it seems that I was putting my identity to the test. However, as someone still in the depths of childhood security, I avoided what could have been great punishment if I were to perform in such a way as an adult. Clearly this conflict was one of my mesosystem in that the relationship of my close friends and more distant relationships was at a point of contention. The fact that I chose one set of friends over another has certainly influenced my psychological development, for I am now certainly an advocate for those in need and unafraid to speak my mind. Those friends that I stayed close to introduced me to theater, which at that time would have been only an exosystem to me, and which is now a mesosystem if not a microsystem. Theater, in turn, has made me more outgoing, resolute, and moral. It appears, simply enough, that just as the theory of development has developed over time, so have I.

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