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The Development of Human Psychology: Retrospect and Prospect of Three Major Theoretical Perspectives

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Abstract: In the context of developmental psychology, many classic theories have provided insights and frameworks for understanding lifelong human development. The psychoanalytic theory holds a "nature determinism" tendency, focusing on the impact of early individual experiences on later development. Cognitive developmental theory emphasizes attention to action, suggesting that the essence of children's psychological development is the adaptation of the subject to the object through action. Social learning theory emphasizes the shaping role of later social experiences on individual psychological development, shifting the focus from genetics and environment to social factors. Future research could integrate relevant theories and propose comprehensive models to understand the lifelong development of human psychology.

Keywords: Developmental Psychology; The Psychoanalytic Theory; Cognitive Developmental Theory; Social Learning Theory.

1. Introduction

Developmental psychology is the field of study that examines psychological and behavioral changes in humans throughout the lifespan. It focuses on various aspects of human development from prenatal stages to old age, including changes and developments in physiology, cognition, social interaction, and emotions. Firstly, developmental psychology contributes to understanding individual differences, helping us comprehend why each person is unique. It investigates the reasons for individual differences, such as why some people develop certain abilities or exhibit certain behavioral characteristics earlier than others. Secondly, developmental psychology can guide educational practices. By understanding the cognitive, emotional, and social development of children at different ages, educators can select appropriate teaching methods and strategies according to the child's developmental stage, thereby promoting their learning and growth. Additionally, developmental psychology is dedicated to addressing practical issues. It studies the problems and challenges individuals face at different stages of development, such as early childhood language development and adolescent identity formation. By gaining an in-depth understanding of the roots and influencing factors of these issues, we can provide appropriate support and interventions to help individuals overcome difficulties and promote healthy development.

The article reviews the three key theories in current developmental psychology: psychoanalytic theory, cognitive developmental theory, and social learning theory. It analyzes individual development from different theoretical perspectives and systematically examines the ambiguity and integration of the three major theories. Through comparative analysis of the similarities and differences between different theories, it explores their different emphases and theoretical viewpoints in explaining the process of individual development, as well as their applications and limitations in practice, thereby deepening our understanding of the uniqueness and complementary nature of different theories.

2. Three Major Theoretical Perspectives

2.1. The Psychoanalytic Theory

Psychoanalysis is a theory developed by the Austrian psychologist and psychiatrist S. Freud (1856-1939) in his clinical practice [1]. Renowned contemporary self-psychologists G. Blank & R. Blank explicitly introduced the term "psychoanalytic developmental psychology" and stated: "Psychoanalytic psychology is a developmental psychology that describes the personality structure since birth. Although the most rapid and fundamental structural characteristics occur in the first few years of life, development is a lifelong process."[2]

The understanding of individual development in psychoanalytic theory primarily focuses on childhood. However, different psychoanalysts have varying interpretations of the child's psychological world and differing focal points. Freud, using psychoanalytic theory, explained the enduring tension and conflicts in the child's inner world. He was particularly interested in how children handle internal feelings, sexual desires, and aggression. He emphasized the significant influence of early childhood, especially the first five years of life, on future psychological functions. He believed that the main factor influencing personality development was early psychological conflicts caused by sexual drives. Different characteristics of these conflicts lead to differences in individual growth and adult psychological functions.

Object Relations Theory suggests that an individual's psychological development occurs very early in life. Early relationships, especially with the mother, have a decisive impact on an individual's psychological development. These early experiences form the individual's psychological structure, shape their self-awareness, and influence their views of themselves and others. The social-cultural school emphasizes the influence of social-cultural factors on the psychology and behavior of developing individuals. For

example, Horney believes that children's basic anxieties originate from the attitudes and behaviors of parents towards them, while Sullivan emphasizes the importance of interpersonal relationships in the formation of personality[3].

Different psychoanalytic theories have different interpretations of the stages of psychological development. Each division emphasizes different aspects. Freud's understanding of personality development is evident in his description of the libido's development, dividing personality development into five stages: the oral stage, anal stage, phallic stage, latency period, and genital stage[4]. Self-psychologists focus more on the development of the self. Erikson proposed the eight-stage theory of life development, describing how children, adolescents, or adults interact with the surrounding environment at each stage.

2.2. Cognitive Developmental Theory

The cognitive development theory, also known as the theory of cognitive development, was proposed by the renowned Swiss psychologist Jean Piaget. This theory gained widespread popularity globally in the 1980s and has continued to develop and expand, being widely applied in the field of education.

Piaget believed that the essence of cognitive development is adaptation. Children's cognition develops continuously from lower to higher levels based on existing schemas through assimilation, accommodation, and equilibrium. Additionally, the process of individual development from birth to maturity is not simply an accumulation of quantity. On one hand, due to environmental influences, organisms undergo changes to adapt to the environment. On the other hand, organisms are not merely passive in adaptation. The entire process of adaptation is also actively constructed internally by the organism. Individual psychological development is the process of individuals achieving equilibrium through assimilation and accommodation to the environment, continuously constructing and refining their cognitive structures amidst the alternation between equilibrium and disequilibrium. Consequently, adaptation can be divided into two different types: assimilation refers to the organism integrating a new stimulus into existing schemas or cognitive structures when faced with a new stimulus situation, while accommodation refers to changes in cognitive structures to adapt to the influence of stimuli when the organism cannot utilize existing schemas to accept and interpret new stimuli[5].

Piaget proposed that, on the one hand, at the level of cognitive development, the process of individual development from birth to maturity involves continuous reconstruction and manifestation of cognitive structures in interaction with the environment, which occurs in different stages: the sensorimotor stage (0-2 years), the preoperational stage (2-7 years), the concrete operational stage (7-11 years), and the formal operational stage (11 years and older). On the other hand, at the level of moral development, children's moral development undergoes a transformation from heteronomy to autonomy. Ten years old is a watershed for children's transition from heteronomous morality to autonomous morality. Moral development also experiences four stages: the egocentric stage (2-5 years), the authority stage (6-8 years), the reciprocity stage (8-10 years), and the justice stage (10-12 years).

In terms of teaching, Piaget did not advocate for teaching children materials that are significantly beyond their developmental level, nor did he endorse accelerating children's development without basis or artificially. However, overly simplistic problems also have little impact on children's development. In Piaget's view, children's cognitive development is based on their existing cognitive structures and is driven by cognitive needs arising from the interaction between existing schemas and the environment.

2.3. Social Learning Theory

The social learning theory, proposed by American psychologist Bandura, led the vast force of behaviorism from traditional reflex research towards a more scientific cognitive orientation, representing a major mainstream of modern psychological development. Bandura's core developmental theory is the social learning theory of children's behavior. Bandura believed that traditional behaviorist theories, such as those of Hull and Skinner, could not explain observational learning phenomena. Firstly, they could not explain the emergence of new behaviors; secondly, they could not explain how a complete behavioral pattern could be acquired from a model; thirdly, the acquisition of these behavioral response patterns could occur independently of reinforcement variables; fourthly, behaviors acquired after observing a model may take several days, weeks, or even months to appear for the first time. Bandura introduced the concept of vicarious learning, suggesting that "essentially, all learning phenomena from direct experience can have this vicarious basis, whereby observers can perform the results of this behavior merely by observing the behavior of others" [6]. This means that when learners learn through observation, they do not need to react directly or experience reinforcement firsthand; instead, they can learn by observing the behavior of others in a particular environment and observing others receive certain reinforcements. Therefore, learning based on a vicarious basis is an important form of human learning.

In the early social learning theory, Bandura believed that children and adolescents are active and thoughtful individuals who can develop in many directions. In the later theory, Bandura used the concept of reciprocal determinism to expound his views on human development, suggesting that there is interaction among the positive person (P), individual behavior (B), and environment (E); the environment influences children, and children also influence the environment. Human behavior is determined by both internal and external forces, but it is by no means a simple sum of the two forces. External environmental factors such as rewards and punishments interact with internal factors such as beliefs, expectations, and motives, and individual behavior, external and internal factors together constitute an influence system. While Skinner believed that the environment (P) shapes personality and behavior, Bandura believed that there is interaction among people, behavior, and the environment. This theory further emphasizes the active role of children in their own development.

The social learning theory also proposes that the condition of self-efficacy expectations will affect the choice of actions and the degree of effort. After conducting extensive research on the formation of self-efficacy and its impact on behavior, Bandura concluded that self-efficacy formation is mainly influenced by five factors: the success or failure of past behavior, vicarious experiences, emotional arousal, linguistic persuasion, and situational conditions. A large amount of research supports the significant role of self-efficacy in individual development, as self-efficacy can influence career

choices [7], enhance learning motivation [8], and so on.

3. Discuss

3.1. Evaluation of Theory

The personality development theory of psychoanalysis particularly emphasizes the relationship between personality formation and early childhood experiences, as well as the parenting attitudes of parents towards children. It has had a significant impact on promoting the psychology field to pay attention to and actively conduct research on early childhood experiences, early education, and childhood mental health. However, psychoanalysis attributes the basic drive of personality development to the libido, which blurs the distinction between humans and animals, neglects the social nature of humans, and overlooks the important role of social and cultural environments in human psychological development.

Piaget's most important contribution to psychology is the transformation of Freud's arbitrary and unsystematic clinical observations into a more scientific and systematic approach, which paved the way for the substantial development of clinical psychology in the future. However, the cognitive development theory also has its shortcomings, namely the neglect of the influence of socio-cultural factors on cognitive processes. Piaget's theory emphasizes the individual's construction of the surrounding environment and the exploration of developmental stages themselves, without delving into how human cognitive processes are influenced by the socio-cultural environment and practical activities. Moreover, due to the neglect of social factors, the cognitive development theory overly emphasizes age differences. In reality, not every child develops according to the age ranges defined by Piaget, as evidenced by the emergence of "child prodigies" contradicting cognitive development theory.

Bandura's social learning theory breaks through the old theoretical framework by integrating behaviorism, cognitive psychology, and humanism, articulating the process and mechanisms of learning with a combined view of information processing and reinforcement, and incorporating social factors into research. However, it also has its shortcomings: firstly, the theory is internally scattered and lacks unity; secondly, the social learning theory focuses on children as research subjects, overlooking the influence of children's developmental stages on observational learning; thirdly, the theory of social learning can only explain the acquisition of indirect experiences, but lacks persuasiveness in explaining the formation of complex procedural or declarative knowledge.

3.2. Prospective to the Future

In summary, existing major theories of human psychological development each have their own emphases, but there has been relatively little research on the integration of different theories, which limits a comprehensive understanding of developmental psychology. Future research could focus on the following aspects: Firstly, in the context of accelerating globalization, attention can be given to the applicability and universality of developmental psychology theories in different cultural backgrounds, as well as the influence of cultural factors on theoretical explanations. Secondly, exploring how to integrate different theories to construct a more comprehensive and systematic theoretical framework of developmental psychology can enhance a deeper understanding of the individual development process and provide more effective guidance and support for practical work. Thirdly, leveraging emerging technologies such as neuroimaging and virtual reality to delve into the physiological and psychological mechanisms of individual development can expand our understanding and interpretation of developmental psychology theories.

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