From Developmental Categories towards Cultural Trajectories

J. Dana Stoll

University of Liverpool

March 29, 2017

From Developmental Categories towards Cultural Trajectories

## Introduction

The study of personality development advances with the philosophical and scientific context in which the respective theories are embedded.

## Categorical Approaches

Early approaches at personality development draw from two methods: the categorization of clinical observation and the staged construction of knowledge and experience. Freud (1923/1961), for example, proposed instinct driven, categorical stages of personality development towards an ideal functioning adult (an Ego that tamed the Id and Superego), focusing on the functioning of the individual. C.G. Jung (1948/1959) examined stereotypes (archetypes) that are embedded in one's cultural tales that influence personal development, which he modelled into a collective unconscious. Erikson (1963) bases much of his reasoning on Freudian thought, however pursues a purposeful approach at developmental stages including a complete human lifetime with cross-cultural considerations to create meaning (cf. also Frankl, 1984).

## Constructive Approaches

Although considered categorical, Piaget set the stage for a constructivist approach at human development. Subsequent stages emerge holistically upon prior, individual constructions. Individuals adapt to their environment through a sequence of assimilation and accomodation (to perturbance). Similarly, Vygotsky (1987) focused on the cultural co-construction of language, i.e. the cognitive internalization and reconstruction of the environment and one's relationship towards it, originating in tool use. Following his zone of proximal development, individual development may be culturally mediated. Whereas Freud and Jung started from a philosophical viewpoint (Jung even lectured on classical Yoga), many constructivists, as an end result, approached a similar observer perspective (cf. Maturana,

2000). As a notable difference, observer and observing are now seen as cultural operations and interactions, not individual entities.

## Scientific Approaches

Bonfenbrenner (1977) directs two substantial points of criticism at the above approaches: The categorical taxonomies omit "the progressive accomodation, throughout the life span, between the growing human organism and the changing environments" (p. 513). Also, earlier approaches are difficult to verify with mid-20th century Popperian science rooted in linear statistics. Their concepts are not well-defined and difficult to measure (ibid., p. 516). Bonfenbrenner draws on social systems theory and introduces an onion model of microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem, in which individual development are embedded. Scientifically, however, Bonfenbrenner's systems approach implies second order cybernetic models, containing open and closed loop circuits that challenge the notion of an all-integrated individual, but suggest the development of multiple roles or sub-personalities in different cultural contexts.

Adding to individual complexity, neurobiological research suggests that the human neuronal network possesses an even higher degree of recurrence than social models. Researching the Williams Syndrome, Karmiloff-Smith (2009) reports that different circuits interact to contribute to phenomena of cognition and personality. Within this interaction, each contributing circuit may have its own developmental life-time trajectory, for example, due to differences in the genetic makeup, leading to a variety of combined effects. The interdependence of multiple developmental trajectories challenges staged, "mental-age matching" approaches even within cultural life-time contexts (ibid., p. 56).

## Conclusion

Early approaches at developmental psychology, for example, Freud and Vygotsky focus on the generation stage of individuals (childhood, cognition) towards an ideal adult that is more or less well-defined. Later approaches consider the whole human lifespan as a

perpetual play of adaptation and identification of individual predispositions within their social contexts. With the advance of the prevailing scientific paradigm, theories of intra- and interpersonal development need to be constantly redefined.

References

Bronfenbrenner, U. (1977). Toward an experimental ecology of human development. *American Psychologist*, 32(7), 513–531.

Erikson, E. H. (1963).*Childhood and society*. New York, NY: Norton.

Frankl, V. E. (1984). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Freud, S. (1961). The ego and the id. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 19, pp. 3-66). London: Hogarth Press. (Original work published 1923)

Jung, C. G. (1959). Archetypes and the Collective Unconsciousness (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). In H. Read et al. (Series Eds.), *The collected works of C.G. Jung* (Vol. 9 pt. 1, 2nd. ed., pp. 3-4). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. (Original work published 1948)

Karmiloff-Smith, A. (2009). Preaching to the converted? From constructivism to neuroconstructivism. *Child Development Perspectives, 3*(2), 99-102.

Maturana, H. (2000). Biologie der Realität [Biology of Reality]. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.

Piaget, R. (1981). Meine Theorie der geistigen Entwicklung [My Theory of Cognitive Development]. Frankfurt am Main: Fischer.

Von Foerster, H. (2003). Cybernetics of Cybernetics. In: *Understanding understanding: Essays on cybernetics and cognition*. New York: Springer.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.