The Study of Human Development

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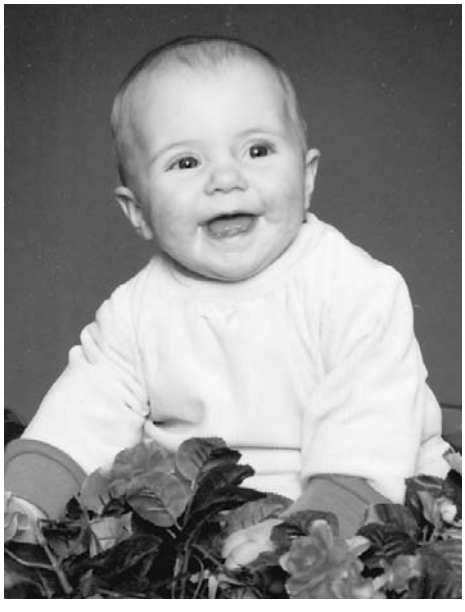

Jacquilyn aged 6 months

Jacquilyn aged 2 years

Jacquilyn aged 4½ years

1 Seeing Children in Context

. . . Still within the little children's eyes
I sought no more that after which I strayed
In face of man or maid;
But still within the little children's eyes
Seems something, something that replies,
They at least are for me, surely for me!
I turned me to them very wistfully
But just as their young eyes grew sudden fair
With dawning answers there
Their angel plucked them from me by the hair.

Francis Thompson, 'The Hound of Heaven'

CHAPTER OUTLINE

KEY TERMS AND CONCEPTS

- Developmental psychology
- 'Gazing at' children
- proprietal
- Postfigurative, configurative, prefigurative
- Paradigm
- Empiricism
- Positivism
- The experiential child
- The iniquitous child
- The virtuous child
- The competent infant
- Mechanistic, organismic, behaviourist, psychodynamic, humanistic, constructivist

Introduction

Since the first edition of this textbook was written and published in 1993 it is readily apparent to me that general and academic interest in the study of child development has increased exponentially. Notwithstanding this, a quick glance in the relevant sections of the local library or bookstore will show that through the ages children have been the subject of description by poets, novelists, philosophers and playwrights. Dietrich Tiedermann is generally acknowledged by historians of child psychology as a pioneer in the field of systematic description in child development. In 1787 Tiedermann published a study of his own child, predicting that it would soon be followed by many others. True to his prediction, the late nineteenth century was witness to a growing interest in child and adolescent development. The latter part of the twentieth century has in many ways produced a veritable harvest of knowledge regarding child, adolescent and family development.

In this chapter consideration is given to the various factors that shape the way we view children and the approaches psychology has taken to the study of children. Some of the many different ways of defining the word 'family' are outlined in the first of The Family Life-cycle series.

The nature of psychology

Psychology is a relatively young discipline, and it would be fair to suggest that some confusion still exists among the general public as to just what it involves. In all likelihood an informal chat to friends or family would elicit a wide range of answers to a question concerning the nature of psychology. The answers would probably include misconceptions (for example, psychology involves reading people's minds), and/or confusion (such as about the difference between psychiatry and psychology).

Psychology basically grew out of the disciplines of philosophy and physiology. Most psychologists would generally agree that psychology includes:

- the study of overt, observable or otherwise measurable behaviour: for example, facial expressions, or physiological changes such as heart rate;
- the study of unseen mental processes, such as thoughts and dreams.

As psychology has emerged as a field of study in its own right in the last 100 years, different branches of the discipline have evolved. Psychologists now work in many areas: teaching in tertiary institutions, counselling in schools, studying animal behaviour, working with the physically and intellectually handicapped, to name but a few. In Australia, the minimum period for basic training in psychology is six years: four years of undergraduate university training and two years of supervision by a qualified psychologist. Many psychologists have additional training at a Masters or PhD level.

Psychologists are now being challenged in this post-modern era to think beyond mainstream empirical ways of researching and understanding child

'Joy is my name' (W. Blake): An image of childhood

development and to be more critical of the theories and assumptions of developmental psychology.

Developmental psychology

A field of study in psychology that is concerned with how the individual grows and changes from conception till death is known as **developmental psychology**. Within this field one special avenue of interest is child development, which is particularly concerned with the study of the individual from conception. This text is essentially a child development text. In focusing on child development, consideration is given to describing the physical, cognitive and socio-emotional changes the individual undergoes. More particularly, the text addresses a number of broad questions:

developmental psychology the study of the individual from conception.

- How do children change as they develop?
- What factors influence the developmental changes?
- What individual differences exist in children's growth and development?

Cairns (1998, p. 26) has noted that 'developmental psychology has its own distinctive history, which is associated with, but independent of, the history of experimental or general psychology'. It is reasonable to argue that a dominant theme in the field (as verified by an examination of the contents page of significant journals) is that of raising children (e.g. Charles Darwin's research; see chapter 3). This arose from the writings of seventeenth and eighteenth-century philosophers such as John Locke, Jean Jacques Rousseau and religious writers such as John Wesley (see chapter 3).

VIEWPOINT
When 178 first-year university students starting a developmental psychology course were asked to jot down their first thought or image prompted by the word 'baby', 44% wrote 'crying'; 13% 'dirty nappies'; 28% 'cute'; 11% 'helpless' and 'fragile'; 4% 'don't know'. The response generally could be categorised under the headings (1) physical attributes, e.g. 'cries a lot'; (2) affective, e.g. 'cute and adorable'; and (3) an attribute that reflected the vulnerable, helpless and innocent nature of babies.

Numerous questions arise out of home observations, such as those of Charles Darwin in the following section. For example, what are the guidelines for normative development (see Gesell; see chapter 3)?

Another significant theme evident in the field concerns whether there is there some sequence to development such that an orderly progression can be identified. Other significant themes also arise concerning the nature of the factors influencing such development. That is, what respective roles do genetics and environment play in the development of children? Questions such as these are an important part of the subject matter of psychology and, in particular, of child development. (See CD for practical exercises.)

Why study child development?

Child development is a young science and the systematic study of children is a relatively recent phenomenon. Courses in child, adolescent and family development today embrace a range of professions including teaching, psychology, social work, child care and nursing, to name but a few.

The reasons for studying children are as broad and complex as the field itself. In reading the literature one becomes aware of how accurately theorists such as Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Karen Horney, Leila Berg and Jean Piaget observed children. In part, it is recognised that through the study of children's behaviour we may better come to understand adult behaviour. As John Milton commented in *Paradise Lost*:

> The childhood shows the man as morning shows the day.

From a somewhat different perspective, Charles Darwin believed that the child was the link between animal and human species. The birth of his son William Erasmus (nicknamed 'Doddy') on 27 December 1839 prompted Charles Darwin to begin a diary description of the development of his son – 'a baby biography'. For example, in *The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals* (first published in 1872), Darwin argued that emotional expressivity was basically a physiological matter and that expressive gestures were largely universal and innate.

> Everyone who has had much to do with young children must have seen how naturally they take to biting when in a passion. It seems instinctive in them as in young crocodiles, who snap their little jaws as soon as they emerge from the egg (Darwin 1965, pp. 241–2).

Other investigators were less interested in comparing human and animal species than Darwin. Thus, Gabriel Compayre believed that information concerning the child's early years would serve to illuminate later development.

Medinnus (1976) identified four main reasons for studying children:

1 An intellectual curiosity concerning natural phenomena.
2 The need to gain information to guide children's behaviour.
3 Increasing our ability to predict behaviour.
4 The need to understand our own behaviour.

In searching for an answer to the question of why we study the development of children, it is vitally important not to lose sight of the historical and cultural context in which childhood exists. It is a salutary point to consider that the very words 'child' and 'childhood' have changed their meaning within the context of recent Western history and have different meanings in different cultures.

'Gazing at' children

The study of child development does not occur in a historical, cultural or philosophical vacuum. Charles Darwin's observations were designed to explore the links between animal and human species. The infant was essentially depicted as a biological organism, influenced and shaped to a greater or less degree by the environment. The study of children, along with the study of 'primitives', was seen as the key to better understanding the development of 'normal' behaviour. The concept of 'recapitulation', understood as the idea that 'ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny', or that the individual in her/his lifetime demonstrates the patterns and stages exhibited in the development of the species, underpins the writing of many of the early theorists. The surge of interest in the study of children, the identification of their 'stages' of development and the obsession with minutely recording 'normal' growth and development underpinned the motivations of much early research, involving 'gazing at' children.

The conduct of this 'science' went hand in hand with the development of an empirical methodology which clearly separated the 'observer' from the 'observed' in the best interests of the scientific endeavour. The infant/child/adolescent was 'objectified' in the spotlight of this critical 'gaze'. As Burman (1994) notes, this exercise involved a 'gendered division of labor', with men viewed as having the necessary credentials to conduct 'objective, verifiable observations. Women were excluded from the investigative enterprise because they were declared constitutionally incapable of regarding their children with the requisite objectivity' (p. 12).

Gazing at children

Factors shaping views of children and families

Writers have identified a number of factors that have shaped our views of children and families over the centuries (Ariès 1962; Schorsch 1979; Elkind 1987; Wertsch and Youniss 1987; Young 1990; Clarke-Stewart, 1998). Two factors consistently

identified are history and culture. As Ariès (1962) has reminded us, little, if anything at all, escapes history and culture, not even the central elements of life itself – women, men and children. A third factor that will also be discussed in this chapter is the philosophy of science.

The child and family in history

In beginning a study of childhood, it is important to appreciate the view expressed by the social historian, Philippe Ariès, that childhood, as it is understood today in Western society, is a relatively recent phenomenon. Following Ariès' (1962) pioneering writings on the history of childhood, a number of writers have supported his views.

Schorsch (1979, p. 11) observes that:

> thinkers of the 16th century, and of the preceding centuries as well, agreed that the child is nothing more than a lower animal – 'the infant mewling and puking in the nurse's arms' as Shakespeare put it baldly but succinctly.

As Schorsch goes on to note, our contemporary beliefs regarding the innocence and importance of the early years may in fact blind us to the frequent heartlessness and cruelty with which children in Western cultures were treated in the past. For example, consider the message preached by the Bishop of Worcester in 1552:

> I exhort you, in God's behalf, to consider the matter, ye parents: suffer not your children to let, or tell false tales. When you hear one of your children to make a lie take him up, and give him three or four good stripes and tell him that it is naught; and when he make another lie, give him six or eight stripes and I am sure when you serve him so, he will leave it (Pinchbeck and Hewitt 1969).

Elkind (1987) has captured some of the complexity of the changing views of childhood from antiquity to the present time. He notes that in ancient Greece the stress was upon educating children into the laws and cultural mores of the time. Children in Babylon went to school at the age of 6, while in Roman times the children attended school around the age of 7 to acquire reading and writing skills. However, according to Elkind, children in mediaeval Europe fared far less well. During this time the prevailing image of children emphasised that the child was a chattel or piece of property of the parent and state. All in all, during the mediaeval period the child did not account for much in the eyes of society, as a sixteenth-century rhyme indicates:

> Of all the months the first behold,
> January two-faced and cold
> Because its eyes two ways are cast
> To face the future and the past.
> Thus the child six summers old
> Is not worth much when all is told.
> *Cited in Schorsch 1979, p. 23.*

Children as property

In Western societies, history shows that for centuries children have been looked upon as property and, more particularly, as the property of their fathers. Paternalism and patriarchy have been significant elements in parent–child relationships for quite some time. Some basis for understanding the contemporary status of children in Western societies is found in the writings of the Greek philosopher, Aristotle. In Bertrand Russell's description of Aristotelian ethics, it is noted that while Aristotle considered human beings as 'ethically equal':

> [T]he justice of a master or a father is a different thing from that of a citizen, for a son or slave is property, and there can be no injustice to one's own property (1974, p. 186).

Law elaborated between AD 1300 and 1800 prescribed the relationship between parent and child in terms of trust. The parent's rights came from the Crown, and the Crown reserved the right to intervene and protect the child's rights and interests. However, as Fraser (1976, p. 322) notes:

> While the court would intervene to protect a child's interests, it did not provide the child with a vehicle to present his grievances to the court, nor did it guarantee the child the right of independent representation.

Apart from the law, some interesting insight is gained into the status of children in Western society from the writings of seventeenth-century philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes and John Locke and nineteenth-century philosopher John Stuart Mill. Hobbes, writing in the seventeenth century, argued that children were cared for solely because they were capable of serving their father and should be assigned a position of complete dependence. 'Like the imbecile, the crazed and the beasts over . . . children . . . there is no law' (1931, p. 257). The implication of Hobbes' argument is that children have no natural rights and no rights by social contract because they lack the ability to make formal contracts with other members of society and cannot understand the consequences of such contracts.

Later in the same century, John Locke, arguing from a different perspective, considered children to be under the jurisdiction of their parents until they were capable of fending for themselves. Until such time, children were thought to lack understanding and therefore they could not assert their will (Russell 1974). Unlike Hobbes, Locke believed that both adults and children possessed certain natural rights which needed protection. Parental benevolence was believed to be sufficient to ensure that children's rights were protected. Locke's outlook rejected the proprietary aspect of parenthood, replacing it with the concept of children as God's property.

Locke's description of children as lacking in understanding reflected the view that children need to develop adult capacities for reasoning and understanding. Until such time, parents were under a God-given obligation to care for children. By implication, where parents failed to fulfil their obligation to children, the state would be empowered to do so.

The late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe were witness to the

dramatic social and economic changes wrought by the Industrial Revolution. In large part, children fared very poorly in the face of these changes. Schorsch (1979) notes that children as young as 4 years of age worked in the cotton mills of England.

> A child over seven worked from sunrise to sunset six days a week with two and a half days off a year; children between six and sixteen earned slightly more than half a woman's wages and only a fourth of a man's (1979, p. 143).

The eighteenth-century French novelist Emile Zola (1979), in his book *Germinal*, depicts 12-year-old children working alongside their fathers and older brothers and sisters in the mineshafts of France.

Eventually child labour laws were enacted, the first being in Britain in 1833, to protect children from the excesses and exploitation of the Industrial Revolution. The nature of childhood and the way it was viewed by society were beginning to change. New emphasis was given to education and recognising the special needs of young children. Childhood was gradually recognised as a distinct stage in human development.

Most recently, the field of developmental psychology has contributed to the recognition of divisions in the concept of childhood itself. Beyond infancy, at least four stages of child development are commonly recognised in Western societies today: (a) early childhood, (b) middle childhood, (c) late childhood and (d) adolescence.

The family in history

Just as society's view of children has changed over the years, the concept of the family also has an important historical legacy. In a provocative analysis, Schorsch (1979, p. 12) makes the observation that in relation to the family:

> [t]he reality is that until fairly modern times most children were either abandoned by their mothers or farmed out to other women shortly after birth, and that, in fact, both the family and family house as we know them today did not even exist until well into the 17th century.

Around this time the 'family', including mother, father and children began to be depicted together in art. More and more, the family was drawn and painted in the context of the house. It was not until the eighteenth century that houses as we know them today began to be built, involving:

> structures that would not only allow families to withdraw from the outside world but would allow individuals to withdraw from one another – houses with corridors, where people did not have to pass one another each time they left or entered the room, houses with bedrooms and other rooms that had specific functions (Schorsch 1979, p. 75).

In an article on contemporary images of Australian families, Funder has noted that it is still proving very difficult to define just what constitutes a family. She concludes (1989, p. 28) that '[i]mages of Australian families are diverse. Just as families are formed and re-formed, so are our images of them'.

Shifts in emphasis in the status of children

Overall, it is possible to identify a number of shifts in emphasis in the status of children in contemporary Western societies. Certainly, a major aspect of the way society views children concerns the proprietary factor. Children are always seen as a natural part of the family unit. Children are conceived by their parents, are raised by them, and usually inherit whatever belongs to their parents. The historical context makes it quite clear that children were owned in a chattel-like fashion by their parents. Some modification to this outlook has occurred with the emergence of the care-giving concept of parenting. Despite the contribution of developmental psychology to our understanding of the physical, social and emotional development of children, far more work is required to clarify the way in which we view children or their families and their status in society.

Children, family and culture

A second important factor shaping the way we understand children and families is that of culture. Kessen (1979) has gone so far as to speak of children and child psychology as 'cultural inventions', highlighting that we cannot easily separate the influence of culture from any discussion of the nature of children and families. To this end, an examination of the role of children and the family in traditional and contemporary Aboriginal communities may serve as a timely reminder of the relativity inherent in any discussion of child and family issues.

Traditional Aboriginal society

Aboriginal people had lived in Australia for over 40 000 years before the first Europeans reached the continent. Their cultures thus predate by tens of thousands of years the building of the pyramids a mere 4500 years ago. At the coming of the Europeans, it is estimated that Australia was inhabited by some 300 000–750 000 Aborigines (Collard, 2000), who formed about 500 clan groups with varying customs, languages and territory.

Lorna Lippman (1970) has noted that traditional Aboriginal societies were oriented towards hunting and gathering. A strict division of labour according to sex was practised, with women staying near the camp with 'the children while men hunted large game in a cooperative venture. Each family unit was responsible for its own subsistence' (Lippman 1970, p. 95). Members of a tribe held similar customs and beliefs, and occupied a fairly well-defined territory. The tribe was divided into hunting and food-gathering bands. The nucleus of each band was a smaller group or clan whose members had religious ties with a series of sacred sites in their part of the tribal territory (Lippman 1970).

Among traditional Aboriginal communities, the values stressed included sharing, mutual cooperation, kinship obligations and personal relationships (Jenkins 1988). Aboriginal children were largely brought up by their mother and her