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Edited by Jonathan Tudge, Michael J. Shanahan and Jaan Valsiner

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Comparisons in Human Development: To Begin a Conversation

*Jonathan Tudge, Michael J. Shanahan, and
Jaan Valsiner*

Studying Comparisons and Development

Comparisons are perhaps the fundamental heuristic tool with which developmentalists generate knowledge. Since the sine qua non of developmental phenomena is the passing of time, developmental knowledge will always involve comparisons across time points. However, given the multiple time frames that often characterize this change, temporal comparisons can be complex. How do patterns of change over ontogenetic time relate to patterns of change over historical time, and how do both relate to microgenetic processes of change? Moreover, many developmentalists adhere to context-sensitive models of development, which imply comparisons through both time and place. What makes for an appropriate comparison group, particularly if groups are chosen from different ages, historical periods, or cultures? And so we begin with the basic premise that comparisons are fundamental but complex tools for understanding development.

Given their foundational role and the multitude of issues that complicate their use, comparisons have been surprisingly absent from developmental discourse. The purpose of this volume is to initiate discussions about how comparisons are and should be used to produce knowledge about development. We choose to focus on their conceptualization, although comparisons lie at the heart of methodological issues as well. These latter issues include historically based (Porter, 1986) and statistical (Rubin, 1974) debates about inference, as well as advanced treatments of methods appropriate for the analysis of change and context (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1991; Collins & Horn, 1991).

Of course, the distinction between methods and concepts is

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permeable. As Gigerenzer (1991) has forcefully argued, the ubiquitous analysis of variance strategy has enabled and constrained the concepts that psychology uses. This is equally true of the concepts that we use to study development. Thus, conceptual concerns about comparisons frequently are influenced by methodological orientations. For example, should individuals unique within groups be thought of as a source of “error variance” or “outliers” and dropped from analyses? Or are they worthy of explanation? These are the types of questions that the authors of this volume address.

The contributors to the volume have all been or are currently associated with the Carolina Consortium on Human Development, an interdisciplinary group of scholars drawn primarily from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke University, and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Its members – including scholars from departments of psychology, sociology, anthropology, education, psychiatry, and human development and family studies – have been involved in weekly seminar meetings since 1987. This volume grew out of the seminar series that took place in the spring of 1993.

Members of the Consortium have come to share some basic perspectives about developmental science; the study of development must be concerned with processes that operate over time and that are inextricably regulated by their physical, biological, social, and cultural contexts. Development is thus understood in systemic terms, with multidirectional influences that cross levels of analysis, including the cellular, the individual, the family, the ecological, the cultural, and the historical. Two questions need to be raised. First, given the richness of this perspective, how are we, as scholars interested in development, to deal effectively with issues of comparisons? Second, how are we, as authors, to ensure that our views are not simply parochial, reflecting our particular orientation? The volume as a whole reflects our answer to the first question. And to balance what might otherwise be a series of parochial statements, we have asked a number of scholars to serve as commentators. Their task is to locate our efforts in a broader context of developmental science. As is true of the Consortium itself, the commentators come from a variety of disciplinary (sociology, psychology, and education) and societal (the United States, Japan, Brazil, and Australia) backgrounds.

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Comparisons in a Multilevel Framework

The systemic approach to development is evident in all of the chapters, although it is addressed most explicitly by Winegar, by Shanahan, Valsiner, and Gottlieb, and by Tudge, Gray, and Hogan, who argue for an approach to developmental science that emphasizes the interrelations between different levels of a system. Each of these chapters is set at the metatheoretical and theoretical levels, but the necessity of seeing development in systemic terms is as evident in the more paradigmatic and empirical chapters – for example, those by Holland and Skinner on Tiji dances in Nepal, by Kurtz-Costes, McCall, and Schneider on cultural and sociopolitical changes in Germany, and by Shanahan and Elder on historical change and individual adaptation in the United States.

A systemic approach, as Shanahan, Valsiner and Gottlieb, point out, requires that comparisons cross traditionally isolated levels of analysis. This is exemplified by Mekos and Clubb in their call for combining quantitative and qualitative analyses and by Shanahan and Elder, who argue that comparisons crossing historical, structural, family, and individual levels are necessary to make sense of trajectories across the life course. Such multilevel analyses require stepping beyond the confines of any one discipline, a position illustrated by Tudge and Putnam as they draw from sociology, psychology, and cultural anthropology to discuss ways in which children acquire culture.

Processes of Development and the Comparisons They Imply

Many of the authors provide data that deal explicitly with change over time, whether considered at the level of history, ontogeny, microgenesis, or a combination thereof. Three chapters are clearly set in historical time, with a focus on development in times of war or economic hardship (Shanahan & Elder), on the process of sociopolitical change in Germany following reunification (Kurtz-Costes et al.), and at the end of one-party rule in Nepal (Holland & Skinner). Mekos and Clubb point to the advantages of taking both an ontogenetic and microgenetic approach to development, and Winterhoff discusses the course of friendship formation over the course of the first year of formal school. Tudge and Putnam discuss

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process at the most microgenetic level, identifying mechanisms by which social class is related to children's self-directedness.

Organization of the Volume

The volume is organized into four parts. The first includes essays on the theory of comparisons. The second focuses on methodology and methods, as viewed from the perspectives of life course study (Shanahan & Elder), developmental psychology (Mekos & Clubb), and cross-cultural psychology (Kurtz-Costes et al.). The third part offers empirical examples of comparative strategies, dealing with development of women in a rural community in Nepal (Holland & Skinner), the development of friendship relations in school in the United States (Winterhoff), and engagement in lessons among U.S. preschoolers (Tudge & Putnam). The fourth consists of commentaries on earlier chapters.

Part One: Metatheoretical Approaches to Developmental Comparisons

Part One includes three essays on the metatheory of comparisons in developmental science. Winegar's chapter argues for an integrative approach to "research," which encompasses metatheory, theory, methodology, and methods. He argues that all scientists (social as well as natural) must state their theoretical assumptions, the ways in which their theory of choice fits the phenomena under study, and the appropriateness of their methods. Comparative strategies should take place at all levels of the research enterprise, although common practice devotes most resources to comparisons at the levels of method and data.

In her commentary, Jeanette Lawrence (Chapter 10) goes one step beyond Winegar, placing the latter's concerns in contemporary socio-cultural context. She points to the pressures that currently serve to shape our field in ways that run counter to Winegar's goal. According to her analysis, scholars (particularly, though by no means exclusively, those entering the field) concern themselves primarily with methods and data, rather than with securing coherent linkages between metatheory, theory, methods, and data. The "social dimensions of . . . science," particularly in North American universities, include demands for productivity and grantsmanship if tenure

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is to be attained, and these demands are not easily met by the type of multilevel research for which Winegar has made a cogent argument.

The chapter by Shanahan, Valsiner and Gottlieb takes a meta-theoretical approach to focus on conceptual commonalities among psychobiologists, psychologists, and sociologists studying development. As such, their effort represents comparative work at the level of metatheory. From their perspective, a multidisciplinary developmental science is most likely to advance if it crosses the boundaries of traditionally isolated disciplines. The authors suggest that five propositions are common to developmental science in dealing with structure, time, change, and development, and they use these propositions to illustrate similarities in the perspectives of developmentally oriented psychobiologists, psychologists, and sociologists. The benefits that derive from this approach are acknowledged by Lawrence and Dodds in their commentary (Chapter 11), but they add a novel balance to calls for interdisciplinary research by identifying its potential drawbacks.

The chapter by Tudge, Gray, and Hogan focuses on two theories that have been labeled *ecological*, a comparative effort at the level of theory. Gibson's and Bronfenbrenner's frameworks are first placed in the broader context of the development of ecological perspectives in the field of psychology. As Tudge and his coauthors point out, these perspectives, while not new in psychology, have never been a part of the mainstream, dominated by the behaviorist tradition and its most recent information-processing reincarnation. Much of this chapter is devoted to an explication of each theory to show that despite striking differences on the surface, the two theories have much in common.

Branco argues in her commentary (Chapter 12) that the differences between them are more important than the fact that both are based on the ecological position. However, just as is true of many minority positions (e.g., a political fringe group), differences in ideology that may be deemed insignificant by those from different ideological perspectives are viewed as critical by proponents. Despite obvious differences in analytical focus, both Gibson and Bronfenbrenner have played a major role in the struggle to make mainstream psychology more open to transactional, dialectical, or interactional links between developing individuals and the environments that surround them.

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The next three chapters, by Shanahan and Elder, by Mekos and Clubb, and by Kurtz-Kostes, McCall, and Schneider, focus on comparisons in three different fields within developmental science – sociology, developmental psychology, and cross-cultural psychology. The authors discuss how comparisons have been used in these disciplines, and outline the strengths and limitations of these strategies.

As developmentally oriented sociologists, Shanahan and Elder deal with the relations between broad historical changes and the ways in which individuals adapt to those changes. They argue that a comparative strategy well-suited to the study of such adaptations is a “nested comparisons” approach. Linking the nested comparisons strategy with quasi-experimental research designs, they indicate how such comparisons allow researchers to explain and understand the complex relations between historical events (such as World War II and the Great Depression) and individual functioning. They draw attention to historical events, family dynamics, and individual characteristics and show that this interweaving of comparisons is necessary to make sense of life-course trajectories.

In his commentary, Hideo Kojima (Chapter 13) notes the importance of *not* treating individuals who do not fit the typical pattern as “outliers” but, rather, seeing their situation as an explicable phenomenon and tracing the particular trajectories that led to outlier status. While Kojima applauds this analytic strategy, he also offers alternative ways of thinking about historical change and individual development.

The approach used by Mekos and Clubb is in many ways similar to that of Shanahan and Elder, although it focuses on comparisons in developmental psychology. The central thesis of these authors is that while comparisons are necessary, the types of comparisons typically employed by developmental psychologists (based on such factors as race, gender, or age group) are what Bronfenbrenner (1988) terms “social address models.” As such, they are incapable of elucidating the mechanisms that explain group differences.

However, Mekos and Clubb argue that group comparisons should not be eschewed. First, membership in a group (whether defined by gender, age, or developmental status) often serves to constrain and enable developmental pathways; groups are relevant to the structuring of developmental pathways. Second, group comparisons are start-

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ing points, as one begins to lay bare critical developmental processes. In particular, Mekos and Clubb demonstrate the effectiveness of combining group comparisons with development over time and, like Shanahan and Elder, the gains of combining quantitative and qualitative comparative strategies.

Kurtz-Costes, McCall, and Schneider are interested in cross-cultural issues and their relevance for adjustments to a new culture, or acculturation. Like Mekos and Clubb, they focus both on the difficulties associated with making comparisons and on ways of conducting research that address these problems. Comparisons lie at the heart of cross-cultural study, and yet, as the authors point out, far too many cultural comparisons are prone to one of five theoretical or methodological problems: the use of “culture” as a “social address”; ethnocentrism; the use of research materials and the selection of samples that are not adequately comparable; and an insufficient concern for both similarities and differences across cultural groups. Kurtz-Costes and her colleagues use their analysis of these comparative problems to highlight research in the area of acculturation, to discuss a model of acculturation, and to introduce a longitudinal study of acculturation in Germany.

As Corsaro points out in his commentary (Chapter 14), the longitudinal study by Kurtz-Costes and colleagues of children and their parents from four different groups in East and West Germany will allow them to set the processes of acculturation in a grounded historical context. Corsaro notes that large-scale quantitative longitudinal studies of acculturation are surprisingly rare. However, despite their level of sophistication, these studies need to be augmented with qualitative ethnographic work in order to understand precisely what is happening to immigrants.

Part Three: Comparisons at the Level of Data

The chapters in Part Three move from discussions of the potential pitfalls of comparative research and focus primarily on specific comparative studies. Chapter 7 by Holland and Skinner provides an account of women’s identity in the process of formation and expression in songs sung at the Tij festival in rural Nepal. The strength of this chapter can be found in the authors’ study of historical events (the decline of the one-party system in Nepal) in conjunction with individual development. Holland and Skinner also examine how dif-

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ferent trajectories of development are linked both to individual characteristics and to sociocultural changes.

This point is discussed by Kojima (Chapter 13), who extends this comparative framework to historical change in Japan. Kojima uses the expression “Songs change with the times, and the times change with songs” to illustrate the ways in which popular songs often reflect prevailing social conditions while also allowing the possibility that what is being sung about may foreshadow, or even effect, change.

Youniss, in his commentary (Chapter 15), reflects on the approach to identity taken by Holland and Skinner – an approach linking individual, social, historical, and cultural forces that is quite at variance with the individualistic, stage-related stance taken by most child psychologists. Like Kojima, Youniss draws connections with historical processes of change, with particular reference to the history of women in the United States a century or more ago. He also sets Holland and Skinner’s work in the context of recent work in self, narratives, and political change.

Winterhoff’s chapter is concerned with children’s friendships, including cross-cultural and within-group comparisons and the heterogeneity of developmental pathways. At the conceptual level he deals with friendships among young children in both agrarian and technocratic societies, examining the ways in which settings, possible partners, and adult conceptions of friendship help determine the development of friendship. Winterhoff provides data from 5- and 6-year-olds in two kindergarten classes to illustrate his more general points.

As Corsaro points out in his commentary (Chapter 14), the strength of Winterhoff’s longitudinal analysis lies in its ability to show the “developmental fluidity” of friendships and how they are supported or constrained by the setting (teachers and classrooms). Drawing a contrast with traditional research in developmental psychology, with its use of positivist methodology and emphasis on outcomes, Corsaro highlights Winterhoff’s interpretive design and concern with process.

The chapter by Tudge and Putnam draws on psychology, sociology, and cultural anthropology. The authors argue, like other contributors to this volume (particularly Shanahan, Valsiner, & Gottlieb), that understanding developmental phenomena involves comparisons across levels of analysis. They focus on aspects of the developing child (gender and the extent to which the children initiate

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activities), the processes of interaction with partners in their activities, and aspects of the context (children from different social classes, at home and in day care). Their data deal with the different types of lessons that children become involved in, both under their own instigation and from other people.

Corsaro, in his commentary (Chapter 14), draws attention to the way in which these data support the work of the sociologist Melvin Kohn and his colleagues (1977; Kohn & Slomczynski, 1990). Whereas Kohn showed that parents' child-rearing beliefs are partly a function of their position in the social stratification system, Tudge and Putnam demonstrate that parents and children behave in ways quite consistent with these beliefs. As Youniss points out (Chapter 15), approaches to child rearing need to focus more on the ways in which children participate in communication and interaction patterns in coming to acquire culture – and, in the process, simultaneously construct (or “reproduce” in Corsaro's terms) culture.

Conclusion

We subtitle this introductory chapter “To Begin a Conversation” to convey our belief that discussion of the issues raised in this volume is essential if we are to increase our understanding of developmental processes. Models of development have become increasingly complex, in recognition of the systemic and time-dependent nature of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1989; Gottlieb, in press; Lerner, 1991). Discussions of, and collaborative conceptualization and research on, the nature of development have to take place between historians, cultural anthropologists, sociologists, psychologists, biologists, and scholars located in departments of education and human and family development (e.g., Elder, Modell, & Parke, 1993). Integration that cuts across disciplinary boundaries is essential in the process of coming to a better understanding of development.

Similarly, as Winegar argues in his chapter, integration across all levels of “research” from metatheory to data analysis is also essential if we are to avoid the conceptual and methodological traps to which our field has been prone. This integration also requires discussions between those primarily involved in metatheoretical and theoretical issues and those interested more in methodological and statistical approaches.

The study of comparisons lies at the heart of such discussions. How

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can we choose appropriate comparison groups when faced with variations of culture, context, temperament, and biology that are developing simultaneously over historical, ontogenetic, and microgenetic time? Each of the following chapters raises questions about these issues. We hope that they contribute to a conversation about comparative strategies in the emerging field of developmental science.

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