

Child development theory

Objectives 20

The nature–nurture divide 21

John Locke (1632–1704) 21

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) 23

Locke and the environmentalists 26

Pavlov and Watson 26

Skinner 26

Bandura 27

Rousseau and the developmentalists 27

Freud (and followers) 27

Erikson 27

Piaget and Kohlberg 28

Gesell 29

Maslow 29

Cultural issues in child development 30

Gender in child development 33

Attachment theory 37

Social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner) 45

Some exercises 51

Objectives

It is essential for anyone undertaking work with a child to understand how children develop. Such knowledge enables the social worker to understand how the child has reached his or her current stage of development. Just as importantly, it provides an understanding of which factors, among many in the child's social environment, are most likely to influence how the child develops in the future. This then provides a focus for intervention as the worker will want to target those factors that are most significant. Like most things in social work, this is easier said than done. Four centuries of thinking

about how children develop have not yielded easy answers, but have rather revealed the complexity of various influences on children's lives.

In this chapter, we will describe the nature–nurture debate – the fundamental dualism underlying knowledge of how children develop – and then we will explore a number of theories of child development to see where they fit within that debate. Throughout, there is an emphasis on understanding cultural variations in how children develop in order to avoid ethnocentrism in practice. Two particular models are discussed in some depth: attachment theory (Bowlby and successors) and social-ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner). At the end of the chapter the reader should have an overview of a broad typology of child development theories and an awareness of more recent thinking on the significant influences on children's lives.

The nature–nurture divide

One of the earliest fundamental divisions between groups of child-development theorists stemmed from the belief among some that children are the way they are because they are born that way, and the belief among others that the environment is the main (if not the exclusive) influence on how children develop. As Burman (1994, p. 49) asks, 'Do children grow or are they made?' This question, now applied to children, is essentially the same question that Western philosophers have been asking over 2000 years about ways of acquiring knowledge. Does true knowledge come from within (is it inborn) or can it only be acquired through the scientific method of empirical research? It is thus no coincidence that the first child-developmental theorists, John Locke and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, are considered to be philosophers in their own right. Let us look more closely at what they thought, keeping in mind that contemporary thinking on the nature–nurture division accepts that both genetic and environmental influences have a part to play.

John Locke (1632–1704)

John Locke was the earlier of the two theorists (he died eight years before Rousseau was born) and he emphasised the importance of environmental influences. Locke did not believe that children are born sinful (as religious thinking of the time suggested) but thought rather that the way they develop is determined by their early experiences. He used the metaphor of the blank slate [*tabula rasa*] to describe a child's development. At birth there is nothing, and life writes the child's story on the slate. He refuted

the concept of innate ideas (as put forward by philosophers such as Descartes and Plato), in which there are certain fundamentals (for example, the existence of God) which the child is born knowing. Experience is everything. Through his or her interactions with people the child's unique personality (character and abilities) is formed. Temperament may vary from child to child, but this is largely irrelevant to the method through which the child's mind is developed. It may seem strange to us now that 'development' should be considered solely in terms of the intellect, ignoring the social and emotional self, but we must remember the philosophical roots of the argument: the debate about how children developed sprang from and reflected the earlier debate about how knowledge was acquired.

Applying philosophy to practice, Locke acknowledged the importance of early experiences in ensuring optimum child development. Parents were advised to encourage their children's curiosity, and answer questions to the best of their ability. They should strive to make learning an enjoyable experience for the child by transforming it into recreation and play. They should also allow the child to be free and unrestrained as far as possible while still respecting the rights and needs of others. Locke's work, and particularly his book on child guidance, was extremely influential. According to Cunningham (1995),

Locke became the guide for innumerable middle-class families. There had been more than a dozen English editions by the mid-eighteenth century, and several editions in French, German, Italian, Dutch, and Swedish in the course of the eighteenth century... the premier child-guidance book of the eighteenth century ... (p. 65)

How does the environment shape the mind of the child? Locke suggested four specific mechanisms: association (ideas become linked); repetition; imitation; and reward and punishment. He was opposed to the use of physical punishment because he believed that it created undesirable associations, generally it was ineffective, and when it was not ineffective it tended to 'break the mind'. It is interesting to relate these points to the modern debate on the physical punishment of children. In terms of rewards he tended to favour social reinforcement (praise and flattery) rather than sweets or money.

There were some inconsistencies, though, between Locke's blank-slate theory and his ideas about how children learn. For example, he contended that children have innate curiosity (so much for the blank slate!) and will learn for learning's sake. In some of his later thinking, he also seemed to be moving towards an appreciation of the inherent nature underlying at least some of children's readiness to learn (i.e., benefit from the environment). For example, he thought that children have difficulty remembering rules in

the abstract and therefore he favoured a modelling approach to teaching children. The notion that very young children are not capable of abstract thinking was later developed by Piaget.

Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78)

In contrast to Locke, Rousseau emphasised the importance of nature, or internal forces. At birth, children have their own individual natures, and adults are advised not to damage this individuality by trying to impose adult notions of reason or social order. Children grow in accordance with Nature's plan, and it is important to allow Nature to guide the child's growth and development. Rousseau, although also a political philosopher addressing the nature of human relations, had little faith in society's ability to guide children's development. Individuals who are well socialised are too dependent upon how others see them and have forgotten how to see with their own eyes and think with their own minds. Rousseau's thinking here might usefully be compared with some of the thinking on conformity, anti-conformity, and non-conformity in the middle of the twentieth century. From some points of view, conformity is a social value in itself, and helping children to take a role in society in which they conform to social expectations is considered to be a good thing. From other points of view, actualisation of the self (e.g., Maslow, 1943) is not necessarily, or even probably, achieved by conforming to the expectations of others.

Rousseau believed that we should be helping children to develop their capacity to think rather than teaching them *how* to think. Nature is described as being like a 'hidden tutor' helping children to develop different capacities at different stages of their lives. Young children are little experimenters, and if given a chance (and an environment that encourages it), they will explore and learn. Knowledge is not something that should be passed from adult to child like a parcel. Rather, children will arrive at a point where they can think logically through the progressive unfolding of inherent abilities. It is only when they are older, in late childhood, that adults should begin to think about actively trying to teach them; doing it too early can be unhelpful.

Rousseau was the first of the 'stage' theorists. For him, the gradual unfolding of the child's inherent capacities came in four main stages of development.

1. *Infancy* (birth to about 2 years)

In this stage, children experience the world through the senses and know nothing of ideas or reason. They experience pleasure and pain. It is the stage of language acquisition.

2. *Childhood* (about 2 to 12 years)

In this stage, children acquire a new independence; they learn to walk, talk and feed themselves. There is also the beginning of a type of reasoning (intuitive), but abstract reasoning does not come until later.

3. *Late childhood* (about 12 to 15 years)

This is a transitional stage during which there are tremendous gains in physical strength. The child's cognitive functions develop, but are still very concrete.

4. *Adolescence*

Children have little interest in others during the first three stages, but in this final stage their social development advances. It is like a 'second birth', and the body changes considerably. It is also a time of transition, when children are neither child nor adult. They are no longer self-sufficient, and are attracted to and need the company of others.

Rousseau's stages give rise to three important considerations: the time frame of the stages; the invariant sequence of stages; and the international influence of both Locke and Rousseau.

The timeframe of the stages. When you look at these four stages, you will probably say, 'But children do that before that age.' For example, by 7/8 months most babies can move forward on their stomachs, by 9 months they can crawl on all fours, and by 12 months many can walk. This is at variance with Rousseau's suggestion that physical independence does not begin until the second stage. Likewise, the emphasis on social relations beginning in adolescence is at variance with the work of Parten (1932) and Dunn (1988, 1993). Parten looked very closely at young children's social (play) behaviour and described a number of stages: unoccupied behaviour, solitary play, onlooking play, parallel play and cooperative play. Dunn, in her work on understanding sibling relationships as the child's first peer relationships, concluded that children's understanding of, and participation in, social relationships begins much earlier than previously thought, when we use certain methods to appraise this (for example, observation techniques). As another example, we might consider that starting adolescence at 15 is very late in light of how most people would experience it today. What might account for these differences? One possibility is that children do in fact develop earlier today than they did several hundred years ago. Another is that research methodologies have improved so that we can now identify achievements of young children which may have escaped us earlier.

The invariant sequence of the stages. The second consideration in Rousseau's work is the sequence of the stages. It is common parlance to say, 'You have to walk before you can run.' In effect, this colloquial expression,

applied to the physical development of the child, means that there are certain skills that cannot be acquired until the child has successfully passed through a previous stage. This seems perfectly self-evident and we have been so happy with the idea that we have applied it to concepts other than physical development. For example, Maslow's hierarchy of needs begins with the satisfaction of physical needs and moves on through various stages (safety, belongingness, self-esteem) to the achievement of self-actualisation. We have only recently begun to question Maslow's assertion that higher needs cannot be reached until lower needs have been satisfied. To be fair, Maslow himself believed that everyone was capable of self-actualisation provided they did not conform too closely to a society which stressed the importance of the lower needs. But we have tended to ignore that part and have concentrated instead on the sequence of the stages, thereby doing grave damage to our understanding of the complexities of human motivation.

The international influence of Locke and Rousseau. The third consideration is the international differences which have resulted from the separate influences of Locke and Rousseau. We have already mentioned that Locke's book on child guidance was translated into many languages. Rousseau's work was also extremely influential. Let us compare the influence of Locke and Rousseau with respect to the notion of children's readiness to be educated. It is widely known that children in the UK begin formal schooling earlier than children in other European countries. In the UK it can be as early as 3 years old. In most European countries, although there is widespread provision for pre-school children, formal schooling does not begin until they are 6 or 7 years of age. This is consistent with the influence of Locke in the UK (children learn from the time of birth), and the influence of Rousseau in other European countries (before a certain age, formal education is unhelpful). This highlights perhaps just how strongly the influence of these two pioneers continues into present-day dialogues about how to promote the development of children.

There has been no shortage of child-development theories following on from Locke and Rousseau. Some are quite global; some address very specific aspects of how children develop. Frequently, consideration of how children develop is divided into physical, intellectual (or cognitive), emotional and social development. Sometimes a further category is added, spiritual or moral development. Most, but not all, are chronological (i.e., dealing with how children change over time).

There is insufficient space here to allow for a detailed consideration of the models put forward by subsequent theorists – and anyway, you are probably familiar with them through courses in psychology. We will just look very briefly at how some of their theories are linked with the work of

Locke and Rousseau. The important word here is 'linked'. We are not saying that subsequent theorists were followers or members of a 'school of thought' as put forward by Locke or Rousseau, just that it is interesting to consider the links.

Locke and the environmentalists	Rousseau and the developmentalists
Pavlov (1849–1936)	Freud (1856–1939) (and followers)
Watson (1878–1958)	Erikson (1902–94)
Skinner (1905–1990)	Piaget (1896–1980) and Kohlberg (1927–87)
Bandura (1925–)	Gesell (1880–1961)
	Maslow (1908–70)

Locke and the environmentalists

Pavlov and Watson

As previously mentioned, Locke suggested that children learn from the environment through an association of ideas. Pavlov used the association ideas with dogs, conditioning them to salivate to the sound of a bell by associating the bell with food. Watson adapted Pavlov's conditioning experiments to a young child, 'little Albert'. Watson induced a fear of white furry objects in little Albert by making a very loud, startling noise whenever a rabbit was produced. In time Albert came to fear the presentation of the rabbit. Hopefully, you are horrified that a researcher was allowed to do such a thing to a child and you are relieved that our ethical standards in research are now very much more stringent. Nevertheless, the experiment did provide evidence that children learn by associating ideas.

Skinner

It was Skinner who took the rather restricted concept of learning by association, and extended it to learning by reinforcement. In extensive experiments with rats, pigeons and other animals, he monitored the impact of reinforcing a particular behaviour. He discovered that a behaviour could be increased by positive reinforcement (reward) and decreased by negative reinforcement (punishment) or lack of reinforcement (ignoring the behaviour). This behavioural model has gained a very strong position in the repertory of methods of helping troubled children. The methods can be linked to Locke's understanding of learning through rewards and punishments.

Bandura

Through his experiments on aggressive behaviour towards a toy doll ('Bobo'), Bandura showed that children can learn not just by association and by the direct consequences of their behaviour (being rewarded, or ignored, or punished), but also by indirect consequences. If a child sees another individual being rewarded (e.g., praised) or punished (e.g., scolded) for a particular behaviour, then it has an impact on the extent to which the child will behave in that way. Bandura concluded that children learn behaviour from having it modelled and by imitating behaviour. His maxim was: 'Children are more likely to do what we do than what we tell them to do.' This fits with Locke, who talked of imitation as being a way that children learn from the environment.

Rousseau and the developmentalists

Freud (and followers)

The Freudian theory of psychoanalysis rests on several basic principles which are closely related to Rousseau's concepts. First, Freud placed a great emphasis on the biological. His early notions of drives (*Das Trieb*) were refined to notions of basic life forces (Eros and Thanatos) driving human behaviour towards life and death. This biological basis of the personality is rooted in the 'nature' side of the nature/nurture dichotomy. Additionally, Freud believed that the human expression of drives (described as 'sexuality') developed through psychosexual stages:

- Oral (birth to the 2nd year)
- Anal (coincides with period of toilet training)
- Phallic (around the 4th year)
- Latency (5th to 12th year)
- Genital (onset of puberty)

These stages are seen as invariant in sequence. Problems experienced at one stage can lead to specific types of psychological difficulties which are distinct from the difficulties resulting from problems at a different stage.

Erikson

Erikson was one of many followers of Freud who broke with the psychoanalytic tradition to develop thinking in a different direction. Erikson took the emphasis away from the biological and psychosexual and looked at the

development of the individual of psychosocial development over the entire lifespan. The stages he proposed are as follows:

1. Basic trust vs. Basic mistrust (birth to 1 year)
2. Autonomy vs. Shame and doubt (1–3 years)
3. Initiative vs. Guilt (3–6 years)
4. Industry vs. Inferiority (7–11 years)
5. Identity vs. Role confusion (adolescence)
6. Intimacy vs. Isolation (early adulthood)
7. Generativity vs. Stagnation (middle adulthood)
8. Ego integrity vs. Despair (late adulthood)

His debt to Rousseau is seen in terms of the unfolding of an inherent plan of development.

Piaget and Kohlberg

If one is familiar with the work of Piaget when reading Rousseau, the extent of the harmony between the two becomes apparent. Piaget's focus was primarily on the cognitive development of children, although he did theorise as well about their emotional development (but not so much about their social development). He put forward a model of cognitive development in which the mental apparatus of the individual becomes increasingly complex and capable of dealing with the comprehension of complex concepts through two processes called *assimilation* and *accommodation*. Both of these processes deal with how the young child integrates experiences which do not fit into his or her view of the world. In the first (assimilation), the child modifies the experience so that it fits. In accommodation, a more radical transformation occurs: the child adapts his or her way of understanding the world in order to be able to integrate the new experience.

Piaget developed a four-stage theory of child development:

- *Period of sensorimotor intelligence* (from birth to the appearance of language, i.e., around 18 months)
- *Pre-operational period* (18 months–7 years)
 - pre-conceptual stage (18 months–4 years)
 - intuitive stage (4 years–7 years)
- *Period of concrete operations* (7 years to adolescence)
- *Period of formal operations* (around 12 years and peaking about three years later)

Again, the stages are invariant sequentially: one must come after the other and the individual cannot operate at a later stage until the earlier

stage has been mastered. However, individuals progress through the stages at different rates, and some may not get to the most advanced stage (formal operations) at all.

Piaget also developed a two-stage theory of moral development. At the first stage, called 'moral realism', children judge the morality of an act in terms of its consequences and are incapable of weighing intentions. For example, someone who breaks twelve plates by accident is much guiltier than someone who breaks two plates on purpose by throwing them at her sister. At the second stage, called 'moral realism', children realise that there is no absolute right and wrong, and that morality depends not on consequences but on intentions (those things that the road to hell is paved with).

Lawrence Kohlberg (1981) extended Piaget's two stages of moral development to three levels, each level containing two stages so that there are six stages altogether. These stages represent the growth of moral concepts or ways of judging, not moral behaviour. Kohlberg's three levels are: (1) pre-conventional (based on punishments and rewards); (2) conventional (based on social conformity); and (3) postconventional (based on moral principles). Again, the levels and stages are sequential and one cannot progress to a higher stage until one has passed through the stage before.

Gesell

Gesell's approach is considered to be maturationist; that is, human traits are determined primarily by genetics. Children simply mature with age, and environment plays a minor role. This can be seen most clearly through the metaphor of the growing plant. As long as the plant is given an environment that does not hold back its development (water, sun, soil, protection from severe elements) it will develop in a way that is pre-programmed. A poor environment may produce a poor rose and a rich environment a richer, more beautiful rose, but a rose it will be and not a carnation. It is clear that this model is allied to Rousseau's concept of the innate unfolding of the child's character.

Maslow

Abraham Maslow represents an interesting example because he began by believing in nurture and changed to the nature perspective. He writes:

Our first baby changed me as a psychologist. It made the behaviourism I had been so enthusiastic about look so foolish that I could not stomach it any more. It was impossible. Having a second baby, and learning how profoundly different people are even before birth, made it impossible for me to think in terms of the kind of learning psychology in which one can teach anybody anything. (Maslow, 1973, p. 176)

As we have already mentioned, Maslow developed a model of a hierarchy of human needs, with physical needs at the base of the pyramid of needs and self-actualisation at the top. The drive for self-actualisation is seen as inherent: one needs to fulfil one's intrinsic nature and become all that one can be in the same way as an acorn needs to grow into an oak. However, this drive is usually suppressed in early childhood by the needs of adults to have children conform to expectations. In adulthood, the drive is suppressed by the willingness of adults to conform to society's expectations.

Crain (1992, p. 322), in his consideration of Maslow, notes:

If Maslow's ideas sound familiar, they are. Maslow and the modern humanist psychologists have ... drawn heavily upon the developmental tradition. Since Rousseau, developmentalists have been preoccupied with the same basic problem as Maslow: Children, as they become socialized, quit relying on their own experience and judgements; they become too dependent on conventions and the opinions of others.

Now that we have looked at some of the ideas of theorists in child development, let us turn our attention to cultural issues.

Cultural issues in child development

Conceptions of how children do develop, how they should develop, and how parents should act in relation to them are not power-neutral concepts based on dispassionate findings from science. Rather, such notions, reflect a balance between those with power and those without. It would be reasonable to suggest, therefore, that theories of child development, like concepts of 'childhood' and 'child abuse', can be viewed as being socially constructed (Stainton Rogers, 1989; Parton, 1985; Burman, 1994). Social construction means that a socio-political phenomenon (for example, child abuse, childhood, elder abuse, mental disorder, 'whiteness', etc.) is not an objective entity but something which arises out of the process of people defining issues (i.e., 'discourse'). Thus, the process of defining the phenomenon becomes part of what is being defined. Since power differentials are part of any discourse, power differentials influence (and indeed become an inherent part of) how a concept comes to be defined. Consider the following metaphor from Pence (1992, pp. 2, 4) in relation to quality in the provision of services for children:

I am interested in not only the small 'r' ruler we use in attempting to measure quality, but also the capital 'R' Ruler who defines what it is that will be measured. ... 'Who is the Ruler?' appears to be the question one

must address before the questions of 'What is the ruler and what is to be measured?' can be considered.

One way of understanding this is by noting that conceptions of how children do, and should develop vary over time within a culture and at the same time between different cultures.

Martin Woodhead (1998, p. 8) observes, 'With few exceptions, "text-book" child development originates mainly in Europe and North America, and mainly within a fairly narrow socio-economic band within these continents.' Likewise, Burman (1994, p. 6) notes, 'developmental psychology ... is usually conducted and written by researchers from Western societies'. Let us look at some examples of researchers and the countries they come from:

Albert Bandura (Canada, then USA)	Maria Montessori (Italy)
Erik Erikson (Germany, then USA)	Ivan Pavlov (Russia)
Sigmund Freud (Austria, then UK)	Jean Piaget (Switzerland)
Arnold Gesell (USA)	Jean Jacques Rousseau (France)
Lawrence Kohlberg (USA)	B. F. Skinner (USA)
John Locke (England)	Lev Vygotsky (Russia)
Abraham Maslow (USA)	John B. Watson (USA)

The countries from which these theorists originate, and in which they worked, represent a relatively small population of children compared with the total population of children in the entire world. Moreover, it is a population that contains for the most part only Western children. Yet theories drawn from work with this population (or samples of it) have been generalised to explain how all children develop the world over. To make matters worse, child-development theorists develop their models with a view to understanding not only how children do develop, but also how they *should* develop, and what actions adults should take in relation to those children. Thus, there is a real potential that Western theorists will dictate to the non-Western world how children should develop and how they should be brought up.

Sanders (1999) looks at this issue in his consideration of the role of ethnocentrism and cultural relativism in child abuse internationally. He considers the extent to which children's needs are the same all over the world, and in particular the need for autonomy and/or responsibility as described by a number of Western child-development theorists (Maslow, 1943; Kellmer Pringle, 1975; Erikson, 1963). He concludes that we can get into serious difficulties if we assume that Western notions of child development have a normative application outside Western cultures.

The very concept of 'needs' presents difficulties if we try to answer the question: 'To what extent do children all over the world have the same needs?' or (the opposite side of the same coin) 'To what extent do children of different cultures have different needs?' These questions are particularly important in relation to international attempts to meet the common needs of all children: for example, the UN Convention on the Rights of Children. On the surface, it would appear that biological and physiological needs are more likely to be common to all children than psychological, emotional and social needs. Woodhead (1990) considers that an understanding of children's needs is so culture specific that it should be banned from discourses about children. He says:

My conclusion, provocatively, is that our understanding and respect for childhood might be better served if 'children's needs' were outlawed from future professional discourse, policy recommendations, and popular psychology. (Woodhead, 1990, p. 60)

While this may be a rather extreme position, it certainly reminds practitioners and students to be very cautious about generalising notions of children's needs outside the cultural context. The following is also from Woodhead (1998, p. 14):

While a mother from Boston might view the Gusii [Kenya] practice of demand feeding as 'spoiling' the child, the demand for obedience as 'repressive' and the use of young children as caregivers as 'abusive', the traditional Gusii mother might view the Western practice of leaving infants to cry as 'abusive', tolerating a toddler's challenging behaviour as 'spoiling' and encouraging playful fun as 'over indulgent'.

Trawick-Smith (1997) considers five major theories of child development: the maturationists (Gesell); the behaviourists (Skinner, Watson, Bandura); the psychoanalytic school (Freud, Erikson); the cognitive/developmental school (Piaget, Vygotsky); and ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner). For each of these, in relation to a particular case study (Adam), he describes the general principles of the theory, how it would apply to Adam's story, general criticisms of the theory, and the multicultural criticisms of the theory. For brevity, we will only consider his multicultural criticisms. We will also only consider the first four major theories, leaving ecological systems theory to be described afterwards.

The work of the *maturationalists* (Gesell) is seen as leading to, or at least supporting, cultural bias. The work of Jensen is cited as an example; Jensen suggested that African American children have lower IQs than white children because of genetically derived intellectual deficiencies. The danger is that the argument of genetic determinism can be used, as it has been for

centuries, to advance a belief that some races are inferior. It is important to remember that genetic differences are just that, differences, not deficits.

In relation to *behavioural theory*, one might ask how it is that in some families or cultural groups in which positive reinforcement is virtually never used, children still manage to grow and learn. An equally important question, arising in part from the effectiveness of behavioural approaches, is the issue of which behaviours are to be reinforced? Who should make the decision as to which behaviours are undesirable and which are to be encouraged? There is a danger of behaviourism being used to promote Anglo-Saxon ideals, i.e. behaviour designed to conform to standards of white, middle-class culture. Trawick-Smith notes, for example, that in some cultures eye contact is an indicator of disrespect, and quietness of children is a quality which is highly valued. In others, eye contact is seen as something to be promoted, and children's verbal participation is viewed as a good thing. These kinds of conflicts can lead to 'mixed socialisation messages'.

Likewise with *psychoanalytic theory*, some of the stages (for example, Erikson's 'autonomy') reflect Anglo-Saxon ideals which are not universally shared in all cultures. In some ethnic groups, collective thought and action are valued over autonomy. In some Japanese American families, a sense of belonging and collectivism – not individual autonomy – are goals in child rearing. It could be argued that the individualistically oriented notion of autonomy in Western views of child development represents a powerful, but minority, view of how children do and should develop.

Cognitive developmental theory is less criticised by Trawick-Smith (1997), who considers it to be generally successful in explaining universal developmental processes across many different cultures. However, again he notes that autonomy is not valued in some cultures, and he also notes the specific cultural biases behind the theories.

Gender in child development

We have already referred to the power dimension with respect to imposing Western cultural norms on images of childhood and child development which are supposed to be universal. The same thing applies to gender. In Western societies, ideas about how children develop, how they should develop, and how they should be reared are very closely linked to gender power relations. We might ask, for example, how theories of child development have been influenced by the fact that child-developmental theorists are predominantly male. (In the lists previously provided, the only woman was Maria Montessori.) Burman (1994) answers that question by suggesting that the focus of developmental psychology has shifted from the child

to the mother, and to the regulation of the adequacy of mothering. In other words, the history of child development can be seen as centuries of men telling women how they should bring up children.

Burman (1994), drawing on the work of Newson and Newson (1974) and Hardyment (1983), describes five historical stages in the kinds of advice given to mothers over the centuries. These are:

1. The stage of religious morality.
2. The stage of physical health and survival.
3. The stage of mental hygiene.
4. The stage of understanding and meeting children's needs.
5. The individualism and fun morality stage.

In the stage of religious morality, when infant mortality was so high, the emphasis was on saving the soul of the child: that is, on preparing for the next world as the child might not survive in this one. Children were viewed as being born sinful, and harsh methods were needed to ensure that the child moved from a state of sin to a state worthy of salvation. Consider for example the two following quotes:

'Break his will now and his soul will live.' (Susan Wesley to her son John (1703–91), founder of Methodism in the eighteenth century, cited by Newson and Newson, 1974, p. 56)

'[Children are] beings who bring into the world a corrupt nature and evil dispositions, which it should be the great end of education to rectify.' (More, a popular nineteenth-century writer, cited in Hendrick, 1994, p. 39)

Rousseau was also aware of the high infant mortality rate, but viewed the implications of this differently. He 'points out that many children will die young, having spent their lives preparing for an adulthood which they never achieved; and he asserts the right of a child to be a child, and to be happy in it' (Cunningham, 1995, p. 66).

The second stage of advice to mothers, emphasising physical health and survival, is often said to have started after the First World War, but it could be argued to have begun at least 20 years before that, with the introduction of health visiting. As described by Sanders (1999), the origin of health visitors (called 'health missionaries' or 'sanitary visitors') can be traced back to the series of cholera epidemics in the latter half of the nineteenth century and to the subsequent legislation (the Public Health Act 1872). The continuing high rates of infant mortality gave rise to the infant welfare movement, in which mother and baby clinics were set up so that mothers could learn how to care for their babies properly. By the middle of the twentieth

century, infant mortality in developed countries had dropped to such an extent that losing a child was considered to be unlucky rather than an expected part of everyday reality.

With survival generally ensured, the third stage of advice to women came into play: advising mothers on the mental hygiene of their offspring. Again, Rousseau is of interest here. Rousseau married an illiterate serving girl (Thérèse) with whom he spent the rest of his life. She gave birth to five children, but Rousseau had them all placed in a state foundling home. He later considered this action wrong, but said he had insufficient money to bring them up. As noted by Crain (1992, p. 9), 'Many people have found Rousseau so deficient as a man that they have refused to take his ideas seriously, especially on education. How can a man who abandoned his own children to an orphanage have the audacity to prescribe the right upbringing for others?'

On the other hand, Rousseau was very pro-woman in his ideas about the rearing of children. Consistent with the rest of his thinking about the importance of allowing the child to develop naturally, he considered that children needed the nurturance provided by a mother rather than the training and discipline that a father might attempt to provide. He was at odds with the Renaissance notion that the father should take responsibility for how the children are reared because of concerns that their mother would 'spoil' them.

You say mothers spoil their children and no doubt that is wrong, but it is worse to deprave them as you do. The mother wants her child to be happy now. She is right, and if her method is wrong, she must be taught a better. Ambition, avarice, tyranny, the mistaken foresight of fathers, their neglect, their harshness, are a hundredfold more harmful to the child than the blind affection of the mother.

(Rousseau, 1993 (orig. 1762), p. 5)

However, whilst he was clear that the nurturing environment should come from the mother, he was equally clear that the necessary direction should come from the father, acting in the role of 'governor'.

Consider how Rousseau's rather indulgent tone differs from the work of Watson and Truby King in the early half of the twentieth century. We have already looked at the work of John Watson in relation to the induced phobia of 'little Albert'. On the basis of his very strong belief about environmental influences, Watson prescribed how children should be treated by their mothers. He too was concerned that mothers might 'spoil' their children.

Loves are home made, built in. The child sees the mother's face when she pets it. Soon, the mere sight of the mother's face calls out the love response. ... So with her footsteps, the sight of the mother's clothes, of

her photograph. All too soon the child gets shot through with too many of these love reactions. (Watson, 1928, p. 75)

He continues:

... remember when you are tempted to pet your child that mother love is a dangerous instrument. An instrument which may inflict a never healing wound, a wound which may make infancy unhappy, adolescence a nightmare, an instrument which may wreck your adult son or daughter's vocational future and their chances for marital happiness.

(Watson, 1928, p. 87)

He believed that parents should behave towards their children like strict executives, and like a good employee, the child was to learn to obey rules and fulfil performance expectations. He believed in very rigid schedules concerning both feeding and toilet training, advocating methods (e.g., enemas for toilet training) that by today's standards might be considered to be abusive.

This kind of rigid thinking about the discipline that children 'need' to acquire, was continued in the work of Truby King, a New Zealand stock-breeder who 'applied principles he developed rearing cattle to the upbringing of children' (Burman, 1994, p. 52). Developing the concept of 'the Truby King Baby', he advocated 'the establishment of perfect regularity of habits, initiated by feeding and cleaning by the clock' (Newson and Newson, 1974, p. 61). He advocated the beginning of bowel training at three days of age.

The fourth stage of advice to parents is the stage of understanding and meeting children's needs, which Burman (1994) describes as being influenced by psychoanalytic theory, placing an emphasis on 'lay ... emotional as well as physical needs, and ... continuity of care' (p. 52). In keeping with our emphasis here on gender issues, however, it should be noted that psychoanalysis was very biased in its consideration of boys and girls. As noted by Trawick-Smith (1997), psychoanalytic theories tend to view the development of male children as normal or ideal and to portray unique features of female development as deficits. For example, the process of separating from parents and becoming an autonomous person is important for boys, while attachment and intimacy are the norm for girls. Yet psychoanalytic theorists view separation as healthy and interpret intimacy as over-dependence or failure to separate.

The fifth and final stage is described as the individualism and fun morality stage, identified as beginning after the Second World War. The rise of affluence and the availability of choice are seen as related to notions of parents enjoying their baby/child. However, even this can take on the form of

a prescription, and a mother who does not feel the kind of enjoyment she is told she ought to feel may well believe that this is due to a deficiency in herself. Of interest in this context is the fact that most of our post-natal services are aimed at 'high-risk' mothers, whereas it is the 'low-risk' mothers who are apt to expect that having a baby will be 'fun' and who may run into trouble when the reality does not meet their expectations.

We have briefly described a number of theories of child development, tracing them back to their origins in the work of either Locke or Rousseau, and commenting on their cultural and gender implications. There are two further theories of child development that we will now consider: attachment theory and social ecological theory. These are both considered fundamental for people engaged in work with children. Neither is really influenced by Locke or Rousseau – attachment theory because it is more of a micro theory, dealing with a very specific and focused aspect of child development, and social ecological theory because it really is *sui generis*, i.e., in a class of its own.

Attachment theory

This section looks at the concept of attachment, its definition, background, and application. To begin with, let us consider what attachment is. Attachment can be defined as:

any behaviour designed to get children into a close, protective relationship with their attachment figures whenever they experience anxiety. (Howe et al., 1999, p. 14)

This definition has several components which should be highlighted before we look at the origins of attachment theory more closely. First, the actual behaviour is one of proximity seeking. Whilst this may be closely related to other aspects of the child's development (emotional security, relationship quality, identity, etc.) the actual behaviour is one that can be observed. It contrasts, for example, with the following definition of attachment by Banyard and Grayson (1996, p. 217):

Attachment refers to a strong emotional tie between two people. In developmental psychology, the term attachment is often taken to mean the emotional tie between the infant and the adult care-giver.

Secondly, Howe et al. (1999) are careful to avoid identification of the attachment figure as the mother, the father, or even the 'primary caregiver'. There is an element of tautology in defining attachment in terms of attachment figures, but it does avoid the difficulty of being overly prescriptive. Finally, the behaviour can be elicited by any experience which causes

anxiety, not just separation. The presence of a stranger, or a novel but menacing experience, may trigger the attachment response.

John Bowlby (1907–90) is generally credited as being the founder of attachment theory, but its roots can be traced further back to the ethologists of the early twentieth century, and from there even to Darwin in the nineteenth century.

Darwin was one of the first to study infant behaviour by direct observation. He kept a baby journal in which he recorded the visible changes in his eldest child, Doddy, from the time he was born. Thus Darwin introduced a useful technique for gathering data as well as a scientific approach to studying children's behaviour. Within the context of his wider theorising about the development of species, Darwin created the opportunity for studying human behaviour by learning from animal behaviour – species develop, societies develop, man develops. As noted by Kessen (1993), it is from Darwin that we derive the notion that by careful observation of the infant and child, we can see the descent of man. The debt to Darwin is apparent in Bowlby's statement,

the only relevant criterion by which to consider the natural adaptedness of any particular part of present-day man's behavioural equipment is the degree to which and the way in which it might contribute to population survival. (Bowlby, 1969, p. 87)

Bowlby was also influenced by ethologists such as Konrad Lorenz (1903–89) and Niko Tinbergen (1907–88) who described imprinting, an instinctive pattern of behaviour in animals which must occur at a certain period of life (if it does not occur then, it will not occur at all), which is irreversible, and which produces a proximity-seeking behaviour. As evidence of the process, Lorenz had baby ducks and goslings imprint on him, so that instead of forming a line behind the mother duck (or goose), they lined up behind him, and followed him around. Bowlby's debt to the ethologists is clear in the following:

We may conclude, therefore, that, so far as is at present known, the way in which attachment behaviour develops in the human infant and becomes focused on a discriminated figure is sufficiently like the way in which it develops in other mammals and in birds, for it to be included, legitimately, under the heading of imprinting. (Bowlby, 1969, p. 273)

Work by Harry Harlow (1905–81) on rhesus monkeys in 1958, further contributed to Bowlby's thinking on attachment. In Harlow's experiments, baby rhesus monkeys were reared on dummy monkeys, and the lack of the social contact that a real monkey would have provided was found to have

dramatic social consequences for the babies later in life. In a variation on the experiment, two dummies were provided, one soft and cuddly, and the other hard but able to provide food. The monkeys were found to spend most of their time clinging to the soft and cuddly dummy, only leaving for short periods to feed off the other. However, these monkeys too grew up to be socially inept, and later studies, which incorporated *some* amount of social contact, suggested that it is the social contact that is more important than either the 'soft and cuddly' feeling or (within reason) the food.

According to Bowlby (1969) human infants aged 6 months to 5 years 'attach' to caregivers and the caregivers bond to the babies. He described any failure in this attachment/bonding process as 'maternal deprivation', and concluded that maternal deprivation could lead to psychopathic and affectionless personality types. He suggests,

many forms of psychiatric disturbance can be attributed either to deviations in the development of attachment behaviour or more rarely, to failure of its development. (Bowlby, 1977, p. 202)

Bowlby collaborated with James and Joyce Robertson who produced a series of films of children in separation situations, highlighting the impact of factors such as gender, the age of the child at separation, familiarity with the setting in which the child was cared for, the type of care setting, contact with the attachment figures, and so forth. The situations in the films are listed below:

- A two-year-old goes to hospital
- John, aged seventeen months, in a residential nursery for nine days
- Kate, aged two years, five months, in foster care for twenty-seven days
- Thomas, aged two years, four months, in foster care for ten days
- Lucy, aged twenty-one months, in foster care for nineteen days
- Jane, aged seventeen months, in foster care for ten days

A comparison of two children (John and Jane) of the same age highlights just how different the impact can be. John spends nine days in a residential nursery where he arrives in the middle of the night without preparation, whilst his mother is in hospital. Jane, on the other hand, is fostered by Joyce Robertson. In anticipation of the planned stay, she has visited the Robertson home and become familiar with Mr and Mrs Robertson. She is in receipt of one-to-one care, with the same caregiver, all the time she is there. The outcomes are very different. For John the experience is traumatic, and in the commentaries to the films the Robertsons indicate that there are long-term negative consequences. For Jane, there are occasions of distress, but they are not overwhelming, and overall the experience seems to be positive, without long-term ill effects. The work of the Robertsons has been extremely

influential. Two examples of this are the closing of residential nurseries during the 1960s and 1970s, and the extension of hospital visiting schemes to include open access for parents of young children. We will revisit the issue of separation when we discuss 'looked-after children' in Chapter 6.

The work of Bowlby has not been without its critics. Most significant has been the reassessment of the concept of maternal deprivation by Rutter (1972), who was particularly critical of focusing separation and attachment issues solely on the mother. He comments,

Schaffer and Emerson (1964) found that the sole principal attachment was to the mother in only half of the eighteen-month-old children they studied and in nearly a third of cases the main attachment was to the father. (Rutter, 1972, p. 17)

Rutter notes that the separation experiences of children are treated as if they were a separation from the mother only, whereas, 'in fact they consist of separation from mother *and* father *and* siblings *and* the home environment' (p. 48). He goes on to identify those factors that mediate the short-term effects of maternal deprivation, such as the age, sex and temperament of the child, the previous mother-child relationship, the child's previous experiences of separation, the duration of the separation or deprivation experience, the presence of other familiar people, and the nature of the circumstances during the separation/deprivation. If one were to take all of these factors and put them into a worst scenario/best scenario framework, it could be seen that the impact of separation from the mother for a child may be extremely damaging, or have minimal consequences, or be somewhere in between depending on the circumstances of the separation.

Rutter also looked at those factors that modify the long-term consequences of separation. In considering the impact of the separation from the parents he noted the various impacts of multiple mothering, transient separations, and prolonged or permanent separations. He considered the type of child care, the presence of good relationships between child and caregiver, and the opportunity to develop attachments to other adults. As with short-term separations, he also considered the impact of the age, sex and temperament of the child. He concluded that children who had mentally ill parents or histories of family discord, whose behaviour was difficult to change, who did not mind messiness and disorder and who were markedly irregular in their eating and sleeping patterns were significantly more likely than other children to develop deviant behaviours.

In summary, in view of Rutter's work, separation in childhood is not necessarily damaging, and will not necessarily lead to damaged adults. That is not, of course, to say that it should be treated lightly, and one should always be mindful of the potentially damaging impact.

Another influence on Bowlby's thinking was the psychoanalytic school of thought. Bowlby had considered a number of alternative foundations for the development of attachment behaviours, and concluded that they were not incompatible, and could operate together. For example, he considered that attachment as a means of protecting vulnerable youngsters from predators did not contradict the need for the infant 'to learn from the mother various activities necessary for survival' (p. 274).

Vera Fahlberg (1988) developed the attachment model further, using a needs arousal and fulfilment model, with two cycles, to understand the development of attachment and bonding between infant and caregiver. In the arousal and relaxation cycle, the child experiences a need leading to displeasure (arousal) which is followed by satisfaction of the need by the caregiver and quiescence on the part of the child (relaxation) until a further need arises. The need could be anything requiring action on the part of the caregiver (hunger – the child needs to be fed; too much sun – the child needs to be moved into the shade; messy nappy – the child needs to be changed; boredom – the child needs stimulation). This cycle is initiated by the child and its continuous operation leads to the development of trust, security and attachment on the part of the child. However, the actions of the caregiver bring about an obvious satisfaction of the need (for example, the child stops crying) and this success is satisfying to the caregiver. The caregiver may then initiate a 'Positive Interaction Cycle'. Here, the caregiver initiates positive interactions with the child, which produces positive responses on the part of the child. The child's positive responses in turn lead the caregiver to initiate more positive interactions with the child. The continuous operation of this cycle leads to the development of self-worth and self-esteem (presumably on the part of both caregiver and child). In other work, Fahlberg has clarified the distinction between the attachment and bonding processes. Attachment is seen as the child's responding pattern in the cycle; bonding is seen as the development of positive (and rewarding) responses on the part of the caregiver. Attachment is what the child does; bonding is what the caregiver does.

These cycles set the patterns for later life. Children base their views and expectations of the world on how they are responded to and how their needs are met. Parents, too, may base their future behaviour on how the child responds. If they feel that they are unable to satisfy the child (for example, the child continues to cry despite all their efforts), they may get frustrated and disheartened and make no further effort.

As part of her work, Fahlberg has produced very clear observation checklists for practitioners assessing attachment. These are differentiated according to age: birth to one year, one to five years, primary school children, and adolescents. For each age group, the checklists take into account both what

the child does and what the parent(s) do. Another aspect of Fahlberg's work incorporates the needs of children at various ages into a life task model. She describes the various 'tasks' that children must accomplish in order to fulfil their needs as they go from stage to stage in their development. These are briefly outlined here.

1. *Basic tasks in the first year of life*
 - 1.1 The meeting of dependency needs;
 - 1.2 The building up of trust and feelings of security, i.e., attachment;
 - 1.3 The beginning of sorting out perceptions of the world.
2. *Basic tasks of the toddler years*
 - 2.1 The need to develop a sense of autonomy and identity;
 - 2.2 Continued sorting out of perceptions of the world and the need to relate to an increasing number of people, to learn their reactions and to respond;
 - 2.3 Period of rapid language acquisition needs lots of stimulation – particularly with spoken language.
3. *Basic tasks of pre-school children (3–6 years)*
 - 3.1 Continuing individuation and self-proficiency in the family setting, learning to care for self; bathing, dressing and toileting, but may still need help. Needs opportunities to play with children of own age as well as family members;
 - 3.2 Dramatic change in conceptual functioning.
4. *Basic tasks of primary school age children (6–12 years)*
 - 4.1 To master problems experienced outside the family;
 - 4.2 Increased academic learning;
 - 4.3 Acquisition of gross motor skills.
5. *Basic tasks of adolescents*
 - 5.1 Psychological separation from the family;
 - 5.2 Identity issues.

Another theorist concerned with attachment was Mary Ainsworth. With her colleagues (Ainsworth et al., 1978), she developed a procedure for empirically measuring a child's attachment. The procedure is called the 'Strange Situation', and consists of eight 3-minute episodes during which the child is brought into a strange room with his or her mother, is joined by a stranger, and is separated from the mother, who later returns. Raters measure the child's reactions to both separations and reunions. The actual procedure is described below.

- *Stage 1* The infant and her mother are brought into a comfortably furnished laboratory playroom and the child has an opportunity to explore this new environment.

- *Stage 2* Another female adult, whom the child does not know, enters the room and sits talking in a friendly way, first to the mother and then to the child.
- *Stage 3* While the stranger is talking to the child, the mother leaves the room unobtrusively, at a prearranged signal.
- *Stage 4* The stranger tries to interact with the child.
- *Stage 5* Mother returns and the stranger leaves her together with the child.
- *Stage 6* Mother then goes out of the room leaving the child there alone.
- *Stage 7* Stranger returns and remains in the room with the child.
- *Stage 8* Mother returns once more.

The video record is scored in terms of the child's behaviour towards the person in the room: seeking contact, maintaining contact, avoidance of contact and resistance to contact. On the basis of this measure, Ainsworth and colleagues described four basic types of attachment (exclusive of a very small category of children subsequently described as non-attached).

The main type is Type B, a secure attachment pattern. These children cry during separation, but are easily soothed upon reunion when the mother returns. They seek and maintain contact during the reunion.

Types A and C both describe types of insecure patterns of attachment: anxious/avoidant and anxious/ambivalent respectively. In Type A, the anxious/avoidant type of insecure attachment, the child shuns contact with the mother after she returns. Either the mother is ignored or the child's welcome is mixed with other responses, such as turning away or averting the gaze. The stranger and the mother are treated similarly. In Type C, the anxious/ambivalent type of insecure attachment, the child is very upset during the absence, but is not easily consoled upon the mother's return. The child resists contact, but there is some proximity-seeking during the reunion. The child is ambivalent about reunions after separations. He or she resists comforting from the stranger.

After these three categories had been described, another category, Type D (disorganised), was added because not all of the children observed fit easily into the previous three categories. Type D (disorganised) is characteristic of families where there has been parental pathology, child abuse, or other indicators of very high social risk. The child appears dazed or confused or is made apprehensive by the separation, and shows no coherent system for dealing with either the separations or the reunions. The child's behaviour may suggest fear and confusion about the relationship and what to expect from it.

That being said, it is interesting to note that Lamb et al. (1985), in their observation of 32 children who had been maltreated or abused either by the mother or by someone else, found that maltreatment by mothers was associated with a marked increase in the number of insecure (especially anxious/avoidant) patterns of attachment. However, where the maltreatment was by someone other than mother, the pattern of attachment to the mother seemed to be unaffected.

Finally, it is useful to consider attachment in a cross-cultural context. Woodhead (1998) conducted a study of early child-care and education programmes in India, Mexico, France, Venezuela and Kenya. He found that patterns of attachment in all of the countries followed a similar course, peaking between 10 and 15 months. He also found differences in a number of aspects related to attachment: for example, the numbers and patterns of attachments, the ways in which caregivers respond to infant distress, and the regulation of close relationships within families. He reminds us that the findings of Bowlby in relation to attachment were in the context of commissioned work reflecting postwar concerns about the impact or otherwise of separation on children who had been in day care whilst mothers contributed to the war effort. In that sense he observes,

evaluations of day care that rely on the standard classifications of secure and insecure attachment prescribed by the 'Strange Situation' (Ainsworth et al., 1978) may misinterpret the emotional adjustment of children for whom separation and reunion has been a daily recurrence. (p. 9)

In this context, we should be aware that separation and reunion is a daily occurrence for many of the children social workers work with today. Many of them are cared for outside the home while their parents work.

Coming back to cross-cultural comparisons, Barnes (1995) summarises the work of Van IJzendoorn and Kroonenberg (1988), who prepared a meta-analysis of attachment studies across different cultures, looking at West Germany, the UK, Holland, Sweden, Israel, Japan, China and the USA. They used the Strange Situation categories. Whilst attachment patterns appeared in all of the countries, there were variations between the countries. Sanders (1999, p. 30) notes that the findings highlight

some very strong differences in the proportion of these three types of attachment patterns in children in different cultures, making a tendency to generalise about attachment across cultures something to be undertaken with extreme caution.

Like other issues previously discussed (e.g., autonomy vs. collective responsibility), the different patterns of attachments in different countries may be

a reflection of different values associated with child rearing in those countries. These values will be internally consistent with other aspects of the roles of children and parents within the societies.

Social ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner)

It would be fair to describe the ecology of human development theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979, 1986, 1989) as existing in a class of its own. It too is a way of understanding how children (and adults) grow and develop but it differs from all other theories of child development in one important respect: they are chronological and linear; the ecological model, though it incorporates a temporal component, is not. Instead, it places a primary emphasis on linking all the different systems influencing the individual (e.g., cultural, social, economic).

Bronfenbrenner (1979) expressed dissatisfaction with the traditional ways of understanding child development in that their exclusive focus was invariably the immediate setting of the individual, and they ignored wider societal impacts on how children develop. This is certainly true of all of the child-development theorists we have so far considered. Likewise, Bronfenbrenner was critical of those disciplines which are more social in their orientation because of their methodological limitations. In this sense there are close parallels with Durkin's (1996) notion of the need for social developmental psychology. For Durkin, the fundamental difficulty was that developmental psychology was not social and social psychology was not developmental.

Ecological thinking appears to be on the verge of gripping the imagination of those who are involved with children either as practitioners or as child-welfare educationalists. Some would argue it is not before time, considering that it has been around for nearly a quarter of a century. As suggested by Barrett (1998, p. 268):

As stage models have become less useful, models which allow more precise classification and measurement of the environment have grown more necessary. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) *Ecology of Human Development* has emerged as by far the most cited and influential reference in developmental science.

Whilst the extent of its influence is perhaps more debatable than suggested by Barrett, there can be no doubt that interest in Bronfenbrenner's model is increasing. One of the real benefits for students and practitioners alike is that such a model enables them to see their clients in the widest possible social contexts. In the hurly-burly of everyday casework, it is easy to lose

sight of the wider picture, and indeed, keeping in mind the wider picture is an ongoing struggle with which every practitioner should be engaged. But the wider picture is often devalued, first because of its seeming lack of relevance to everyday work, and secondly because of the inability of practitioners to actually do anything about the wider context within which their clients find themselves. For example, Blackburn (1991, 1993) looks at the issue of poverty and the strategies that practitioners can adopt to address it. She notes (1991, p. 8) that 'the fact that poverty is an everyday reality for a growing number of families means that work with families needs to be based on a clear understanding of the meaning, causes and dimensions of poverty in Britain today'. She also notes powerful barriers to addressing poverty: practitioners not believing they have a mandate to address it, and practitioners feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of the problem.

Perhaps one of the reasons why ecological theory is not applied as extensively as it might be is because the concepts are rather difficult to understand. Readers of Bronfenbrenner struggle with his material. They struggle for two main reasons. First, Bronfenbrenner is not easy to read. Like the work of many other child-development theorists (Freud, Piaget), there is an abstruse quality to the text that makes it difficult to get through. And like earlier theorists, he has created new words (neologisms) in order to express the ideas contained within the theory. As we continue in this chapter, we will encounter 'chronosystems', 'ecological transitions', 'microsystems', 'mesosystems', 'exosystems', and 'macrosystems'. To make matters worse, he has located these new words in a series of definitions (1-14), propositions (A-H) and hypotheses (1-50).

The main thrust of the ecological model is the adaptation between the individual and his or her environment. Bronfenbrenner defines the ecology of human development as follows:

the scientific study of the progressive, mutual accommodation, throughout the lifespan, between a growing human organism and the changing immediate environments in which it lives, as this process is affected by relations obtaining within and between these immediate settings, as well as the larger social contexts, both formal and informal, in which the settings are embedded. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 21)

You see why a whole text written like this would be difficult to follow.

The mutual accommodation mentioned in the definition is the result of the individual and the environment interacting with each other. The individual plays an active role in influencing the environment, which in turn exerts an influence on the individual, which takes into account that previous influence, and so on. It is a synergistic (combined) cycle of influence between the changing individual and the changing environment.

The environment itself is seen as a complex set of systems within systems. In the opening paragraphs of his book, Bronfenbrenner (1979) uses the image of a set of Russian dolls, but it is perhaps easier to visualise the model as four systems represented by four concentric circles (see Figure 2.1). These four systems are given the labels: microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem and macrosystem (micro=small; meso=middle; exo=outside; macro=large or great).

The four systems are illustrated in Figure 2.1.

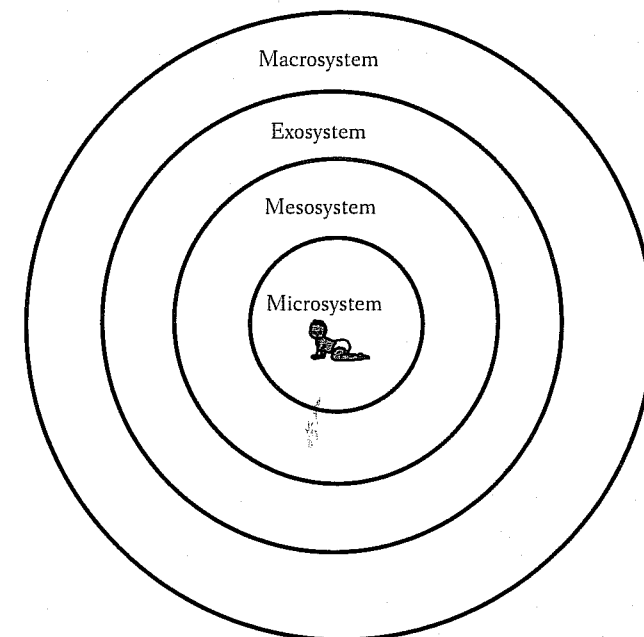


Figure 2.1 Bronfenbrenner's ecology of human development

The *microsystem* (small system) is defined as:

a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics. (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 22)

Examples of the microsystem would be the home, the school, and the workplace. It is this level to which most traditional theories of child development restrict themselves. Wherever there is a setting in which the child is physically present, there is a microsystem for his or her development. Considerations of the quality of care in the family environment come under this system. Family therapy is based largely in this system. Notions about the

quality of out-of-home care (for example, in nurseries and playgroups, and other preschool care) are based in this level of system. For any one child, there is not one microsystem, but many. This is true at any one period of time, but becomes more true as the child grows older. In fact, one way of understanding child-development microsystems as the child grows is by considering their proliferation in number and complexity. To begin with, the child is largely rooted in the family system. As he or she grows, the child moves into the school system, and learns to move back and forth between these two microsystems. As the child gets older still (and becomes more independent), the child moves more and more between many different microsystems. By the time children become adolescents, they may have not one, but several different peer groups to which they relate in different ways.

The *mesosystem* (middle system) is defined as comprising:

the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighbourhood; for an adult, among family, work, and social life). (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25)

Examples of the mesosystem would be interactions between family, school, peer group and church. Bronfenbrenner describes the mesosystem as a 'system of microsystems' (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25). It is a system comprising the network of the different microsystems of the child. In the last 25 years we have seen considerable thinking about the concept of 'partnership with parents', and it is here that the concept is most easily illustrated. Consider, for example, the influence of the relationship between parents and teachers in handling a nine-year-old boy's behavioural difficulty. In the first case, the parents and the teachers are able to discuss the problem so that a concerted and consistent approach can be adopted in both home and school (let's say, for example, a behavioural programme). The parents do not feel threatened by the teacher, who treats them with respect and values their contribution. They do not feel defensive, as if they are being accused of causing the difficulty that the school then has to deal with. In the second scenario, however, the parents do feel threatened, as if someone is pointing the finger of blame at them. They therefore work less effectively with the school in developing a home/school strategy. There may be a number of resulting difficulties. The problem may not be able to be resolved at all. The solution of the problem may be situation specific (it continues at home but not at school, or vice versa). The problem may take longer to resolve than necessary. The point for our purposes here is that the nature of the relationship between the school and home, *in itself*, is an influence on how the child will develop.

As another example, consider two of the microsystems of an adolescent, the family and the peer group. The nature of the relationship between the adolescent's parents and the adolescent's peer group is likely to exert an influence on the young person that is distinct from the two separate influences respectively. Perhaps the adolescent will identify more completely with the peer group, in defiance of his parents, or less completely, in compliance with his parents' wishes.

Of course it is important to remember that the influence is reciprocal. Not only does the nature of the relationship between parent(s) and school influence the child, but the child influences the nature of that relationship. The same is true in the case of the adolescent and his or her peer group.

The *exosystem* (outside system) is defined as:

one or more settings that do not involve the developing person as an active participant, but in which events occur that affect, or are affected by, what happens in the setting containing the developing person.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 25)

Examples of the exosystem include the world of work, the neighbourhood or local community, the mass media, agencies of government (local, state and national), communication and transportation facilities, and informal social networks. The exosystem is the most challenging to understand, but its main features are that it does not contain the individual and that it is localised (although it may reflect locally the operation of national factors).

Understanding the impact of the exosystem on the individual is a two-stage process. The first stage is to demonstrate the impact of the exosystem on the individual's microsystem. The second stage is to demonstrate the resulting impact of the microsystem on the individual. If either is absent, then the system is not an exosystem for the individual. This also works in reverse; that is, the individual may exert an impact on his or her microsystem in a way which has wider repercussions beyond the microsystem. For example, a child might interact with his peer group in a way that causes disruption in a youth centre and affects the local community.

The *macrosystem* (large system) is defined as:

consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order systems (micro-, meso-, and exo-) that exist, or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideology underlying such consistencies. (p. 26)

Examples of the macrosystem can be both explicit (for example, laws, regulations and rules) and implicit (for example, belief systems as they are reflected in custom and practice). It is here that we see another influence on Bronfenbrenner's thinking about child development. Nearly ten years earlier he wrote a book (Bronfenbrenner, 1970) in which he raised a question about how the cultural differences between the USSR and the USA in bringing up children affected the children's lives. The main dimension he looked at was 'concern of one generation for the next', concluding that the greater investment of adults in the lives of their children in the USSR contrasted with the trend to age-segregated peer-group influences in the USA. He wrote that:

children in the USA are more likely to be cruel, inconsiderate or dishonest, that fewer of them are polite, orderly, kind or helpful, that many are selfish and few have any real sense of responsibility. In contrast, Soviet children develop a concern for others and feeling of community at an early age. (Bronfenbrenner, 1970, sleeve notes)

It is at the level of the macrosystem that we can consider the ways in which children internalise values in relation to gender, disability, race, sexual orientation, and so forth. An important part of the macrosystem is the way in which ideologies at the national level (based on power definitions of what is 'normal') operate at the local level, through books that the child reads, television, the behaviour of adults, and a host of other influences. We can understand macrosystem influences best when we are able to compare them with the macrosystem influences of other cultures: for example, Bronfenbrenner's contrast between the results of child-rearing practices in the USA and the USSR.

Now we come to the concept of ecological transition, which takes account of changes over time. Such a transition is defined as:

whenever a person's position in the ecological environment is altered as the result of a change in role, setting, or both.

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979, p. 26)

Examples of ecological transitions are the birth of a new baby, the arrival of a sibling, the child's first day at school, beginning work, or the loss of a significant person from the microsystem. Indeed any loss from the microsystem, any addition to it, or any change in the way the components of the microsystem relate to each other could entail an ecological transition.

One of the main advantages of an ecological orientation towards child development is its congruence with anti-discriminatory practice. It exhorts

the practitioner to look widely at the influences on a particular child in a particular place, and in doing so challenges the practitioner to become aware of how structural inequalities within society are played out in the very immediate situations that the practitioner encounters. However, a continual difficulty for the practitioner is how to put theory into practice. The recent *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need* (Department of Health et al., 2000) encourages practitioners to think widely in their assessments:

The care and upbringing of children does not take place in a vacuum. All family members are influenced both positively and negatively by the wider family, the neighbourhood and social networks in which they live (p. 35)

These ideas, however, stop at the exosystem level of analysis. Whilst the guidance does not go so far as to prescribe that macrosystem factors should be part of the assessment, it is argued here that they are very significant, and are integrally related to an understanding of the child in his or her situation. A consideration of the macrosystem for an individual child is important because it calls upon the practitioner to locate his or her practice in the widest possible political and social contexts, and can serve as a secure basis for developing anti-discriminatory practice.

In this chapter, we have looked at the different sides of the nurture–nature debate as illustrated by the work of Locke and Rousseau and the developmental theorists who followed them. We have discussed cultural and gender issues in child development, and have touched on attachment theory and social ecological theory. In the next chapter, we will focus on the skills needed to work with children and families.

Some exercises

Exercise 2.1 Nature/nurture

Consider various aspects of how children develop, and share views on the extent to which they are determined by heredity or by environment. Some examples (but please use more) are:

- intelligence
- temperament
- physical attributes (consider different kinds, stature, body shape)
- personal likes and dislikes
- abilities/talents (e.g., music or art)

Exercise 2.2 Spare the rod

Consider from the perspective of learning theory the effectiveness of physical punishment on a child in relation to:

- (a) the impact on the non-desired behaviour;
- (b) the learning of the legitimacy of aggression by children.

Exercise 2.3 Spoiled goods?

Consider the meaning of the word 'spoil' in everyday usage. What does it mean? How is that concept applied to 'spoiling' a child? How does it reflect societal expectations about the role of children?

Exercise 2.4 Separation experiences

Consider any separation experience you may have had in your life (or that of someone very close to you). What factors made the separation worse? What factors made it better?

Exercise 2.5 Applying the ecological model

Take any well-known individual (it could be real or fictional) about whom there is a sufficient quantity of biographical information. Describe all the factors you can in relation to the four systems (microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem) that impinge on that individual.