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THEORETICAL/CONCEPTUAL ISSUES IN DEVELOPMENTAL RESEARCH IN AFRICA

By
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Abstract

The author argues that the need for an appropriate developmental psychology for Africa, and the search for "indigenous" psychologies, should not prevent the development of overarching theoretical frameworks. He outlines two of these, stemming from cross-cultural psychology: the developmental niche and the eco-cultural framework. Research in Côte d'Ivoire congruent with these theories is briefly referred to.

Key Words: Cross-cultural psychology, theory, cognitive development.

Resumé

L'auteur défend l'idée que la nécessité de développer une psychologie développementale appropriée pour l'Afrique, et des psychologies "locales", ne devrait pas exclure la recherche de cadres théoriques généraux. Il en résume deux provenant de la psychologie inter-culturelle: la niche développementale et le modèle éco-culturel. Il fait brièvement référence à des recherches menées en Côte d'Ivoire qui sont congruentes avec ces théories.

Mots Clés: Psychologie inter-culturelle, théorie, développement cognitif.

The Need For a Relevant Developmental Psychology

Complaints are often voiced that mainstream developmental psychology, as developed mainly in Europe and North America, is highly ethnocentric. It deals with issues that are relevant to Western societies, and its data base consists of studies carried out in highly homogeneous cultural settings. Nevertheless the theories that are proposed are often considered a priori, i.e. without empirical evidence, to be universal.

We are all aware of these limitations, that have been voiced by psychologists in the South, in Africa (e.g. Nsamenang, 1992) and

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universal aspects of behaviour as well as culturally relative ones. People around the world are not only different from each other in interesting ways, they are also similar, or the same, in important ways. Among other issues, international understanding rests on both the recognition of these similarities and the acceptance of diversity.

In this paper, I will therefore argue for the value of retaining some theoretical and conceptual models of cross-cultural psychology. These models may provide the frameworks for integrating the indigenous psychologies that can only be developed locally. As examples, I will take the overall framework which we have used for two textbooks in cross-cultural psychology published recently (Segall, Dasen, Berry & Poortinga, 1990; Berry, Poortinga, Segall & Dasen, 1992), Berry's eco-cultural framework, and one that is more specifically relevant to developmental psychology, the "developmental niche" proposed by Super & Harkness (1986).

In the above-mentioned textbooks, we adopt the midline position which we call "universalist" because it combines the study of cultural diversity with the search for universal psychological processes, in contrast with the "absolutist" position of a large part of mainstream psychology, and the extreme "relativist" position that is often advocated by anthropology or cultural psychology (Shweder, 1990). The absolutist position is still being practiced, particularly in psychometric studies, but the very notion of "culture-free" or "culture-fair" tests is now rejected by most cross-cultural psychologists. At the other extreme, the relativists deem any comparison to be impossible, which leads to the theory-blind accumulation of descriptive, idiosyncratic studies. These three positions can also be labelled "imposed etic" (absolutist), "emic" (relativist) and "derived etic" (universalist), although the use of these terms is, admittedly, not without problems (Berry, 1989).

The Developmental Niche

The model of the developmental niche is a means for integrating findings from psychology and anthropology. Traditionally, developmental psychology tended to study the child out of its socio-cultural context, while cultural anthropology emphasized only the context; it is now proposed to take the child in its context as the unit of analysis. As much as possible, simultaneous attention should be paid to the three following components: (1) the physical

elsewhere (e.g. Sinha, 1986), as well as by Western cross-cultural psychologists (Bril & Lehalle, 1988; Segall, Dasen, Berry & Poortinga 1990; Berry, Poortinga, Segall & Dasen, 1992; Dasen, 1993). What is needed is a more relevant, "appropriate" developmental psychology (Moghaddam & Taylor, 1986); for Africa, an African developmental psychology.

Against the mainstream trend, cross-cultural psychology has called for the empirical, comparative study of psychology in different cultural contexts. The purpose of cross-cultural psychology is often to put existing theories to the test: which aspects are indeed universal? and which are culturally relative? Which factors are confounded in monocultural studies that can be disentangled through quasi-experimental designs.

Now, this methodological aspect of cross-cultural psychology is not sufficient to make it relevant to, say, Africa. The theories that are being tested are still of Western origins, the problems that are to be solved by applications are not necessarily those considered most important. The research is usually not initiated in Africa, but carried out in Africa. Thus a new trend has developed recently within cross-cultural psychology: the search for "indigenous" psychologies (Sinha, 1989). In recent conferences of the International Association for Cross-Cultural Psychology (IACCP), this theme has become very prominent, and in a recent regional IACCP meeting for Asia, in Kathmandu, Nepal, it was even the dominant one. This new direction of research is being developed mainly under the impulse of non-Western psychologists who, whether they have been trained locally or abroad, have the courage to shed the imported outlooks in the search for local relevance.

While I fully support this trend, and welcome it, I would like, in this paper, to play the devil's advocate, and argue that the development of indigenous psychologies should only be a momentary paradigm. It is much needed, and still only at the beginning, and should therefore receive maximum attention and encouragement. However, in the long run, there is need for integration. Indigenous psychologies, while relevant in each particular cultural context, will be just as parochial, and ethnocentric, as Western psychology is at the moment. The mere multiplication of independently developed streams of psychology is not the answer, because we need to study

and social contexts in which the child lives; (2) the culturally determined rearing and educational practices; (3) what Super & Harkness call the psychological characteristics of the parents, and which others label as parental ethnotheories, everyday or naïve conceptions, social representations, local knowledge or folk psychology.

The study of child-rearing practices and parental ethnotheories, using mainly interviews or questionnaires, has become an important line of research. This has been illustrated by the many studies of this kind reported to the international workshop on "Child Development and National Development in Africa" held in Yaounde in 1992: Augustine Agu on child-rearing practices and adult conceptions of development in Somalia, Abraham Husain on early social environment and cognitive development of children in Ethiopia, Andy Gilbert on local knowledge in South Africa, Amechi Nweze on family environment, self-concept and emotional adjustment of adolescents in Nigeria, and the work of Abroise Zagré in Burkina Faso, etc. The different definitions of childhood proposed by Thérèse Tchombe (in this issue of the *Journal of Psychology in Africa*), and the questionnaires she used with parents and teachers on the aims of education and the factors of cognitive growth would also fall into this category.

To implement the model fully, multi-method studies are needed: what the parents say needs to be complemented with what they actually do (through behaviour observations), a detailed description of the contexts (drawing on other social sciences such as anthropology, sociology, demography, economics, etc.), and, of course, the study of the child's behaviour itself, seeing all of these as interacting as a system. Existing studies have usually implemented only part of the scheme. For example, a study by Bril & Zack (1989) shows how the expectations of French and Bambara mothers in Mali regarding the development of the baby's ability to sit without support is congruent with the actual age of achievement of this psychomotor milestone.

The Eco-cultural Framework

This is an overall framework designed to study the effects of variables at the group level (ecological and socio-historical contexts, "culture") on individual behaviour through the processes of cultural transmission (enculturation and socialization) and acculturation. Among the implications of the framework is the fact that behaviour is usually

adaptive: in the cognitive domain, for example, and to put it in simple terms, people develop and value those skills that are useful. Basically this speaks in favour of difference-models rather than deficit-models, which means that researchers, teachers, social workers, or those who design intervention programs should look for the existing strengths and coping mechanisms to build on, rather than for lacks to be compensated. It seems to me that deficit-models are still encountered very often, both in the social representations of parents and teachers and in those of researchers.

However, this is not to deny that social disruption exists, and has ill-effects, for example the dislocation of families through civil war, or under the difficult economic and social constraints that prevail in several African countries. In the eco-cultural model, the two components of the socio-political context and acculturation processes are here to remind us that cultural adaptation is a continuous process, and that behaviour that was adaptive in one context may no longer be so under the conditions of rapid social change.

Piaget and the Baoulé

An illustration of research inspired by the eco-cultural framework is the comparative study of concrete operational development in nomadic hunting-and-gathering societies (in Australia and Canada) and sedentary societies (Ebrie and Baoulé in Côte d'Ivoire) living mainly from agriculture. It was found that the former value spatial skills more than quantitative concepts, because these are needed for the spatial orientation across a wide area, while the latter value quantitative concepts needed to stock and market agricultural produce. In relation to this, children were found to develop spatial, respectively conservation concepts more rapidly (see Dasen & Heron, 1981 for a general review).

Further research on concrete operational development among Baoulé children showed that the time-lags in conceptual development could be reduced or eliminated with appropriate training techniques. The internal validity of a battery of Piagetian tasks was demonstrated by factor analysis, and their external validity through significant correlations with age, schooling and school performance (Dasen, 1984). This research, although it is "etic" in orientation, demonstrates that, beyond some cultural differences in the quantitative aspects of

performance and the rate of development of competence in specific cognitive domains, there are also universal aspects to concrete operational development. Baoulé children do use concrete operations for problem solving, even though Piagetian concept development may not be what Baoulé parents would define as intelligence. Thus, this "etic" approach can be usefully complemented by a more "emic" one: the study of parental ethnotheories. We have done this in studying the Baoulé definitions of N'glouèlé (Dasen et al., 1985), a study that was later pursued with rural populations in the Swiss Alps (Schurmans & Dasen, 1992).

Other interesting "emic" research inspired by Piaget's theory has been carried out by Saxe (1981a, 1981b) in Papua New Guinea, but it remains, unfortunately, extremely rare. Very interesting "emic" research in Africa, in the area of cognitive development, is the work reported by Tapé Gozé (1993).

The eco-cultural framework does not imply necessarily an "etic" approach, nor an assumption of universality of the psychological processes: it assumes that behaviour is adaptive, but that behaviour may well be qualitatively different. Thus I see no contradiction between the framework and Tapé Gozé's proposal that analogical reasoning is, in many cases, more functional than formal reasoning, while being just as abstract. The model would argue for building upon the strengths represented by this type of intelligence (imagination, creativity, etc.). This type of research, however, cannot result from "expatriate" projects, since a full and inside cultural knowledge is required in order to discover such qualitative differences. We have, in Tapé's research, a good example of the beginning of the development of a truly African psychology.

Conclusion

In order to be useful in its contribution to national development, developmental psychology needs to become "appropriate". This means, on the one hand, that it should deal with the social issues that need to be resolved, and that are quite different from those of the rich, Western countries. Many examples of such problems that need to be resolved have been given during this workshop. I do not think that psychology alone will be very helpful, but an interdisciplinary approach. While mainstream psychology is often very parochial and

closed to the input of other social sciences, the life-span perspective advocated by the International Society for the Study of Behavioural Development (ISSBD) is open to such an approach.

But developmental psychology cannot, and should not be only applied: "There is nothing as practical as a good theory", goes the saying. Without theory, application is likely to be short-lived. Therefore, theoretical and conceptual development is also needed. This should take two forms: The development of truly African "indigenous" psychologies, and the further development of theoretical models that can integrate different strands. The two frameworks I have chosen to present here will probably be replaced, in due course, by others, but in the meantime I think they can contribute to valuable research.

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