

Environmental Factors of Personality Development

Introduction:

Nature versus Nurture; it is the debate that has been argued for centuries. Geneticists argue that personality traits, while to some extent are influenced by the environment, are primarily derived from the genetic hereditary make up of a person. It has also been argued that genes are the dominant factors of why a child will develop into an adult with certain personality traits including the propensity for violence, alcoholism, shyness, aggressiveness, or even like-ability.

Behaviorists on the other hand claim that personality traits, while influenced by the hereditary make up of a child, are predominantly determined by the experiences and environmental aspects of a child's life such as parental methodology and sibling relationships or lack thereof.

The following studies examine the relationships between

- ◆ Early childhood exposure to TV violence and the propensity to develop aggressive adult personalities
- ◆ The trajectories towards violence during middle childhood, and whether school-based intervention is effective in reducing this trend,
- ◆ The introduction of a somewhat contrary theory called "Group Socialization Theory", which questions the importance of dyadic relationships, including that of the parent's role as well as the genetic factors of personality development. The theory argues that these factors are less influential in the

development of a child's personality than the group social dynamics that occur outside the home.

Summaries:

Article 1: Longitudinal Relations Between Children's Exposure to TV Violence and Their Aggressive and Violent Behavior in Young

Adulthood: 1977-1992

Developmental Psychology 2003, Vol. 39, No. 2. 201-221

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Overview:

This study examines the possible effects of children's exposure to TV and media violence and the propensity to become aggressive and or violent adults.

Researchers revisited data from 1977 study in which a group of 557 children from the Chicago area were interviewed and exposed to short films depicting violence.

The study showed an immediate increase in violence and aggression in the short term. Unfortunately, no long-term data was ever considered in the original study.

This study aims to determine if these same children, now adults, have been affected by their exposure to violence as children.

Questions such as:

- A. To what extent does early childhood exposure to media violence predict young adult aggression and violence?
- B. Are there gender differences in the predictability?
- C. Does the extent to which the child viewed identifies with the aggressive character or believes the plot is realistic affect the strength of the prediction?
- D. To what extent does any long term relation seem to be due to more aggressive children simply liking to watch violence or seem to be due to some environmental, family, or personal "Third Variable" that stimulates both childhood violence viewing and childhood and adult aggression?

In the follow up study conducted between 1992 and 1995, a total of 398 participants were located and re-interviewed, of these 329 actually provided complete follow up information for the analysis.

Data:

Several “measures “, were formulated based on different criteria such as:

Child measures (1970’s):

- ◆ **TV violence viewing:** which tabulated the frequency and intensity of the exposure to violent TV.
- ◆ **Identification** with aggressive characters and the amount of imitation of such characters they engaged in.
- ◆ **Judgement of the realism-** whether the child thought that the depiction of violence was close to “real life”, or not.
- ◆ **Aggressive Behavior-** such as pushing and starting fights for no reason.

Parent Measures (1970’s):

- ◆ **Education levels** –used as a measure of socioeconomic status
- ◆ **Aggressive personality-self reported**
- ◆ **Physical aggression-against another adult, self reported**
- ◆ **Aggressive fantasies**
- ◆ **Nurturing practices** -such as rejection of the child, or harsh punishment
- ◆ **Mobility orientation**-the need to strive and get ahead
- ◆ **Parent TV viewing** -frequency and TV violence viewing

Adult Measures (1990’s): Self reports from the children of the 1970’s.

- ◆ **TV violence viewing**
- ◆ **Antisocial** and aggressive personality assessments were also performed
- ◆ **Adult Aggressive Behavior:**
 - Indirect aggression**-taking a person’s things or badmouthing someone.
 - Verbal aggression**-belittling or verbally abusing someone
 - Mild physical aggression**- hitting kicking shoving
 - General aggression**- starting fights for no reason
 - Severe physical aggression**- choking punching threatening with a weapon
 - Spousal aggression**- engaging in aggression against their spouse.

Results:

It was found that gender differences existed with regard to the types of aggression mostly likely employed; women were more likely to engage in "indirect" forms of aggression while males were more likely to engage in physical aggression. Interestingly however, men and women scored relatively equally in general, verbal, and spousal aggression.

Regardless of the gender differences, there was a strong correlation between childhood TV violence viewing and adult aggression 15 years later. The study also concluded that the degree of childhood exposure did positively correlate with the degree of adult violent tendencies.

When socioeconomic status and intellectual ability were controlled for, it was found that children of lower SES tended to watch more TV and as such may have been exposed to more TV violence thus explaining the positive correlation between low SES and increased aggression as an adult.

It was noted that regardless of the child's intelligence, the parent's intelligence, or the initial (hereditary) influences of the child's aggressiveness, there was a positive correlation between adult aggression and childhood exposure.

The effect of parenting practices for the child's development was shown to be less significant than the influence of the TV violence viewing. This result is interesting in that it somewhat diminishes the parental role in the development of aggressive children into aggressive adults, (barring of course severe abuse and harm to the child which would greatly override all of these influences according to current theory).

Another point is that this effect only seems to occur in young children. Older children or young adults seem to be able to distinguish between what is real and what is TV and as such view the violence in a different and separate context than their younger cohorts.

It appears that the only way to prevent aggressiveness from developing is to avoid exposing children violent programming or media. Unfortunately this is much easier said than done in a capitalist society where violence sells...

Article 2: Developmental trajectories Toward Violence In middle Childhood: Course, Demographic Differences, and Response to School-Based Intervention.

Developmental Psychology, 2003, Vol. 39, No. 2 324-348
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Overview:

This study focused on the development of strategies to prevent children from developing aggressive personalities by educating them and their teachers in the employment of alternative strategies for conflict resolution.

Most studies of this kind were conducted with children who were considered to be high-risk children such as those who may have exhibited aggressive behavior at home or in other venues.

This study on the other hand was performed in an effort to evaluate the effect of universal prevention throughout the school system, and not just targeted, high-risk children. It is here that the RCCP, (Resolving Conflict Creatively Program), has been introduced to determine if these forecasts can be altered and aggressive behavior reduced in a universal way.

It is hypothesized that there are three primary social-emotional development areas or domains that can forecast future aggressive and violent behavior. These areas are thought to change over the course of the child's development.

- ◆ **Teacher's Perceptions of children's aggressive and pro-social behaviors.**
- ◆ **Self-reports of behavioral symptomatology, (depression, frustration etc.)**
- ◆ **Social cognitive processes known to place children at higher risk for future aggressive and violent behavior.**

Data:

The study took place New York City public school system with N= 11,160 school children ranging from the first to sixth grades over the course of two years. Data was collected from teacher's perceptions of child aggression through observation, and self reports by children.

The focus of the study was on environmental variables that influence human aggressive behavior. These variables will affect one or more of three mental processes:

- ◆ The perception of a threat, irritation or fear.
- ◆ The accessibility of one's aggressive responses as stored in memory.
- ◆ The concept that aggression or violence will lead to a positive result.

Two of these types of processes were studied in the present article. The first of these is the perception of a threat and the availability of aggressive responses in one's memory.

It was clear from the study that each of these processes was affected by environmental experiences. For example if a child is exposed to harsh punitive punishments, they will internalize these schemas and their future behavior will more likely reflect these experiences. Another example would be that a child may grow up in a peaceful and nurturing home, but live in a neighborhood where his or her peers behave aggressively and as such, aggression becomes the social norm outside the home. Thus ecological influences can provide a causal link to aggression.

The goal of RCCP, (Resolving Conflict Creatively Program), was to change the social dynamics that occur within the school environment, and to evaluate whether or not aggression and violence could be reduced through psychosocial alternatives.

Alternatives such as constructive conflict resolution, strategies that promote positive group inter-relations, respect for other cultures as well as their own, and alternative choices and strategies for dealing with prejudice as well as their role in a peaceful society.

Results:

The study showed that while there is a general tendency for aggressive and violent behavior to increase as the child approaches puberty, the rates at which these tendencies occur differ between gender, SES, and race / ethnicity.

Girls for example, showed a slower rate of increase in aggression and interpersonal skills in the early years but after age 8, they showed a faster increase in the aggression and reduction of interpersonal skills than the boys did.

SES curves show similar trends in which those children receiving free school lunches tended to be more at risk than others. One can only assume that socio-dynamic influences are at work whether they are attributed to peer influences, teachers' influences, or parental methodologies.

The RCCP results showed that this intervention was indeed successful in reducing the rates of growth of hostile attribution bias. In other words programs and techniques associated with RCCP such as peer mediation do have an effect on amount of aggression developed in elementary and middle school years.

The idea that changing the social dynamics in a universal sense within the context of the school system appears to have merit. Of course the shape and slope of the aggression curves is at the mercy of other outside variables, as such as the home

environment, neighborhood contexts and experiences and indeed biological factors. But it is noteworthy that there can be such a great effect on the personality development of children by the intervention of this program within this one venue.

I feel this study points the way towards the idea that environmental, group dynamics and social-emotional learning may play a role in child development.

Article 3: Where Is the Child's Environment? A Group Socialization Theory of Development

Psychological Review, July 1995 Vol. 102, No. 3, 458-489

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Overview:

This article is a comprehensive review of research from many sources and examines whether the current theory that parental role in the child's development is as significant as it has been postulated by geneticists and behavioral scientists. The author examines many facets of the developmental process and the dynamics that occur throughout the child's life from birth to adolescence.

In each case the argument is made that a child's personality development is more a product of his or her social environment outside the home than it is from the home environment or genetics.

The author also concludes that each of us may indeed have a multiple of personalities, each of which is displayed depending upon the social context in which we find ourselves at any given time. Each of which was developed as a result of learned behavior within a specific context of our environment. Thus the author postulates that the role of parents, while critical in the first months and years of a child's life, becomes less important to the child as he or she matures into adolescence. Also, that at some point, parents become somewhat interchangeable because they have little or no impact on the child's personality development relative to the effect that peers, teachers, and other acquaintances have on the child outside the home.

Genetics play an important role in the propensity to develop certain personality traits. However, even children who grow up in the same household have different experiences within the microenvironment of the household and thus develop different personalities. This has been shown to be true even for monozygotic twins who were raised in typical families by loving parents. If genetics were the primary factor in personality development it would follow that siblings of the same relative age would develop very similar personalities. Studies have shown this not to be the case.

It is therefore reasonable to theorize that environmental factors are more than likely primary to the developing personality. This is not to say that genetics has no role, it merely suggests that while genetics provides a propensity for certain traits to develop, they also require environmental nurturing or triggers to allow them to come to the surface. For example, a child who is born into a family that has a history of aggression, may not develop an aggressive personality if his or her parents, siblings, teachers, outside contacts, TV shows, musical lyrics, etc. do not display aggressive attitudes or expose the child to aggressive shows or lyrics.

Of course there is no doubt that parents who abuse and punish their children with unreasonable aggression and violence will invoke whatever aggressive and violent tendencies the child may have in their genetic makeup as well as cause other severe emotional and psychological damage.

For the purposes of this article, we will assume that all things being equal, the parenting style of these children are within socially acceptable norms for our society, and that abusive or punitive parenting styles are negated.

The theory presented in the article... "Group socialization Theory", deals with the shaping of adult personality characteristics as a result of childhood experiences outside the home. The theory implies that children would develop into the same sort of adults if all conditions of outside influence such as peer group, neighborhoods, teachers, subcultural groups, and schools, but the parent's were interchangeable.

Context Specific Learning:

Parents' socialization of the child is important at the beginning, but this importance fades with time. Children learn from many sources but their learning is context specific. Referring to an experiment performed by Rovee-Collier (1993), young babies were taught to kick a mobile with one foot to make it move but if any detail of the surroundings was altered, such as a different color pattern of the blanket in the crib, the babies would forget what they had learned because the context or environment in which they learned the behavior had changed. If the crib was returned to its original condition, the babies exhibited recall of learned behavior.

This leads to the concept that what a child learns in one context such as the home environment, may not be applicable to the outside world and vice versa.

It is evident that people have different personalities in different social environments, we are all politicians to some degree. But where does this learning occur? Our parents do not teach us to be different outside the home than we are inside the home.

Group Processes:

Phrases like, he's a jock, or he's a geek have been around for years, some are associated with positive self-image and some are not. Most of us want to associate with one group or another that we feel represents what we want to think of ourselves. We all want to be accepted and have a positive perception of ourselves.

This is why soon after the child begins to become mobile, we see comparisons and alliances forming. I'm bigger than you are, or we are the smart kids. **Group socialization occurs in early childhood and as such the group develops its own social rules and standards.** Usually the most powerful members of the group will dictate or exemplify the rules of which all others will follow. These social rules may be the result of something that one of the children learned at home or from a teacher, but it is this indirect cultural transmission that occurs after it passes through the filter of the children's group.

Adolescence:

As adolescence approaches, children seem to become more and more alienated with regard to the parental influences at home. The peer group now takes control over the child's personality development. Younger children look up to the older upperclassmen and older siblings for social cues and examples of behavioral norms.

As their bodies mature and grow the need to distinguish themselves from adults becomes more and more important. The new adversarial categorization of "teenagers vs. adults", seems to crop up out of nowhere. **The child no longer wishes to be associated with his or her parents and seeks out ways to make the differences between**

them and adults more obvious. How many times has your son or daughter insisted on walking 20 feet ahead of you while shopping or walking down a public street? It is as if they feel the need to put some space between the adults and themselves so as not to be observed as being "with the adults", in public.

"Adolescents are not aspiring to be adults they are contrasting themselves with adults", thus they will adopt strange hairstyles, clothing and become somewhat delinquent so that they might defy the rules of the adult world.

Who is socializing the children?

Freud introduced the world to the psychoanalytic theory of development and the superego, which is supposedly responsible for the moral code of each individual. The superego is strongly associated with positive self-image of one's personality and as such, is the guide to self-identification as a good or normal person.

The Group Socialization theory states that identification with the group; not participation in dyadic relationships is responsible for environmental modifications of personality characteristics. It is important to understand that human groups are social categories, and that when children categorize themselves as group members, they will adopt the normative behavior of that group. This is where the multiplicity of personality comes in. The child will not act the same within the peer group as he or she does at home and the child spends more and more time outside the home as he or she matures through middle childhood. Thus it is theorized that the home environment has no real lasting effects on the adult personality.

Erikson (1963) stated that "there is no workable future within the womb of his family". This is to say that children will eventually leave the home and must therefore develop survival skills outside the home in order to reproduce.

Parental influences on the child's personality as an adult are very much watered down by the Influences from the outside world. This could explain the "us versus them" self-categorization, and the rejection of everything "adult" during the child's adolescence.

My Conclusions:

I conclude from these three articles that while children are genetically predisposed to certain personality traits, it is not a foregone conclusion that they will develop these traits. Other influences and environmental conditions must also be present in order for the genetic propensity of a given trait to flourish.

From the first article we can see that young children who are exposed to aggression through TV and the media have a tendency to develop into aggressive adults.

The second article shows that aggression and violence can be reduced, and that intervention can prevent the development of aggressive personalities during the middle years of childhood.

Both of these articles show that personality traits are a combination of genetic and behavioral/observational learning. And in both cases the influence of parents is minimal.

This leads us to the third and most controversial article, which purports that, the most influential part of the developing personality is the group social dynamic that occurs outside the parental sphere of influence.

Due to the length of the article it was impossible to bring forth but a few examples of the basis for this theory and it's common sense approach. But it is my opinion that this theory does have a great deal of merit and should not be dismissed by geneticists and behavioral psychologists. **Many of the examples given in the article consist of real world scenarios that have been shown to exist and in fact I have experienced myself both as a child and as an adult with children.**