Children's Development from a Cultural–Historical Approach: Children's Activity in Everyday Local Settings as Foundation for Their Development

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A central dilemma in developmental psychology has been to combine general concepts with research of the individual child in all her complexity in everyday life activities. Psychologists such as Riegel, Bronfenbrenner, Burman, Morss, Hedegaard, and Walkerdine have criticized research approaches that study child development from a functional view. Sociologists and anthropologists, such as Corsaro, James, Jenks, Prout, and Qvotrup have instead argued for childhood studies as the alternative to developmental psychology. None of these approaches is alone sufficient; instead, it is important to formulate a theoretical approach of child and youth development that combines general psychological concepts with research of children and youth in concrete settings, such as home or school. The aim of this article is to argue that this will be possible by building on Vygotsky's cultural–historical theories of the zone of proximal development and developmental crises. A theory of children's development should include more directly than it has in the past the practice in children's everyday institutions and the conditions the society give children for development and at the same time attempt to grasp the child's perspective. A theory of children's development has to be anchored in societal values, that is, what different institutions value as a good life. Examples from my research on children in Danish kindergartens and immigrant children in Danish schools are used to exemplify the arguments.

One of the dilemmas for the psychology of child development has been how to keep a scientific approach to the study of children while including the specific conditions for their development. Demands for a scientific approach have led to several one-dimensional conceptions of development where the focus has been on the development of different psychological functions and competencies. Theories about a "monster child" have been constructed, attempting to view children's development from a "bird's-eye perspective" in order to fulfill these requirements.

Psychologists in the 1970s, such as Claus Riegel (1975) and Urie Brofenbrenner (1977), and the philosopher Marx Wartofsky (1983) have formulated this kind of critique. All three

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researchers argued that children's development should be seen as dynamic in interaction with societal conditions, thereby a much more complex understanding is possible of the multiple and varied way children develop. Riegel pointed to the diversity in children's development as connected to the interaction of not only a biological trajectory of development but also a psychological, a cultural, and a material trajectory that create a great variety of developmental possibilities for development through variation in the way they interact in different children's development. In Bronfenbrenner's theory, a person's development is inscribed in micro-, meso-, and macrosystems that interact. Wartofsky pointed out that each child is born into societal traditions that have to be considered in order to understand a particular person's development of specific ways of psychological functioning. This kind of criticism also found its way into sociology and anthropology in the 1990s by William Corsaro (1997); Alison James, Chris Jenks, and Allan Prout (1997); and Jens Qvortrup (2004). Their arguments have been that children should be studied localized in time and space in order to conceptualize the variability between children's development. Therefore, they argued that research of childhood offers a better approach than the "grand theories of child development."

In this article I present a cultural–historical approach to conceptualizing children's development that takes the variability that can be found in children's development into consideration. I find that by using a cultural–historical perspective that focuses on practices and activities one can take a step further than Riegel and Bronfenbrenner. Bronfenbrenner's (1977) model is close to what I present, but the difference is that he conceptualizes society as a pattern that is realized within the other systems:

> A microsystem *is the complex relations between the developing person and their immediate environment (e.g., home, school, workplace, etc.).* (p. 514)
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> A mesosystem *comprises the interrelations among major settings containing the developing person at a particular point in his or her life.* (p. 515)
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> A macrosystem *refers to the overarching institutional patterns of the culture or subculture, such as economic, social, educational, legal, and political systems, of which micro-, meso-, and ecosystem are the concrete manifestations.* (p. 515)

In Bronfenbrenner's theory a person's development is inscribed into a set of systems; in the cultural–historical theory to development that I outline here the practice of the societal institutions and the activity of the person are the keys—persons are participating in and creating activities that realize and contribute to the institutional practices that society provides while also contributing to changes in society. Personal activities are not systems but processes, and therefore they are not concrete manifestations of institutional practice; they are not inscribed into each other but influence each other dialectically. A person contributes to his own institutional conditions and the perspective of his society; therefore, institution and person both have to be conceptualized as contributing to practice in a theory of children's development.

To accomplish this I see society, institutions, and person as three different perspectives in a cultural–historical theory of development: (a) society's perspective with traditions that implies values, norms, and discourses about child development; (b) different institutions' perspectives that include different practices; and (c) children's perspectives that include their engagements and motivations. This theoretical approach to an individual's development is deeply inspired by Vygotsky. His notion of the zone of proximal development as well as his conceptions of the child's social situation of development and of crises have been central to formulating this

alternative approach to the dominating theories of child development that one can find in most textbooks of psychology (see among others Berk, 2005; Cole, Cole, & Lightfoot, 2005). However, Vygotsky's theory has to be expanded to include different perspectives on children's social situations of development so that it can consider the diversity of conditions for children's development and their everyday activities. A diversity of traditions and values for a good life is central for outlining a cultural–historical approach to development and important for the conceptualization of children's development through their participation in a variety of institutional practices.

An example can illustrate how different practice traditions with different demands and expectations can influence a preschool child's activity and social situation of development as well as create crises in the child's social situation.

THE EXAMPLE OF A KINDERGARTEN CHILD

Observation of a 5-year-old boy's activity in kindergarten illustrates how differences in practices between school and kindergarten contribute to the creation of a developmental crisis. In the example, the child's orientation to a school activity (possibly based on home expectations) influences his activity in kindergarten and his social situation of development (Hedegaard, 1995).

Extract From Observation of Jens (5 Years)

The pedagogue asks Jens to go with her and another child to a small room, where they usually read. She wants to read for them. Jens runs away from her and places himself next to the observer in the common room.

Jens:	I have to write a letter.
	The observer shows him how to write JENS and invites him to write underneath her writing.
	He starts the task, but writes JES, and then inserts an N when the observer shows him how to write an N by drawing two straight lines and combining them with a diagonal line.
	The pedagogue asks Jens again to come into the reading room and join her and Christina.
	Jens folds his paper with his name and wants to take it home and give it to his daddy.
	The observer enters together with Jens.
	The pedagogue puts her arm around Jens while reading a fairy-tale.
Jens:	My dad will be angry.
	The pedagogue continues to read without listening to Jens.
Jens:	Do you hear? My dad will be angry if you read that book.
	He jumps up and runs around in the small room. The pedagogue wants to put her arm around him again.
	He becomes wild when she touches him and runs out of the room. The pedagogue runs after him. They come back and Jens sits down reluctantly next to Christina so that the pedagogue cannot put her arm around him. The observer asks Jens to listen so that afterwards he can explain to her what Anita, the pedagogue, is reading. The pedagogue has chosen a new book; the new

	book is about whales and is rather technical. Anita says (directed at the observer): This is not such a successful choice for a storybook.
	Despite this, she continues reading. Jens is very concentrated. She points at a picture and says: This is a baby.
Jens comments:	That is not how a baby looks.
The pedagogue:	Yes, whales!
Jens:	Not baby whales. (Jens corrects the pedagogue to show that he knows they are talking about whales.)

The child, Jens's, perspective.   When he entered school, Jens oriented himself toward academic competence and therefore wanted to do activities such as reading and writing, which can be seen in his expression of wanting to write a letter, his engagement while writing his name, and engagement with the whale book. A child that is oriented toward entering school wants to do the "real school activity"; being cozy while listening to fairy tales is not enough, and that is what Jens was demonstrating. He was perhaps influenced by values at home, such as his father's, and this could be why Jens told the pedagogue his dad would not appreciate the "childish" book that she first chose as a reading text. When the pedagogue took out a "school-like" book about whales, Jens was willing to sit calmly and listen.

The kindergarten practice and the pedagogue's perspective.   The pedagogue wanted to build close and tender relations to Jens, as she viewed Jens as too energetic and disturbing. She wanted to calm him down by putting her arm around him. In kindergarten this is the practice: to care for children and give them the possibility to play.

The conflict can be seen as related to the fact that Jens was oriented toward learning and appropriating "a school child's competences" and not being "a small child." It is not that Jens did not want tenderness and closeness, but it was secondary to his dominant motive: orientation toward learning. He therefore became angry when the pedagogue held him as a small child. Closeness and tenderness in this situation has to be given in a way that supports the kindergarten child's new dominant motive orientation, which, in the example of Jens, is his new orientation to school activities.

AIM OF THIS ARTICLE

The task is to find a way to characterize children's development such that crises are included in a child's social situation of development without characterizing the children as mentally ill or obstructive. Crises need to be connected to change in the relations of the child's social situation with other persons and within different institutional practices. This extract illustrates that crises can be connected with a child's appropriation of a qualitative new orientation. Appropriation of new competences and motives leads to revision or disappearance of earlier competences; in this process crisis can turn up.

The aim in this article is to formulate a conception of children's development that includes the perspective of the child, considers practices and their traditions within institutions, and looks at the societal conditions for these practices. This aim is motivated by a desire to understand how to create conditions that lead children through their crises of development and thereby contribute to children's development of competencies and motives that are appreciated in the

activities of the everyday practices that they participate in. To create conditions for development and to change children's problematic behavior one must build on values about a "good life" and "good development." Therefore, both an understanding of how children's psychological development is created through their activities in institutional practice and an explication of values of development are important.

DEVELOPMENTAL THEORIES AND THEIR RELATION TO PRACTICE

Educational practice is constructed on the basis of theories and values about children and childhood. Upbringing and education are directed toward ideals of how to bring the children through the educational system. One could expect that in schools this can be done by formulating expectations concerning what the skills and knowledge children should acquire, but as soon as a child's home and nursery/kindergarten get involved it becomes more obvious that a more general developmental perspective is implied—one that aims at the formation of personality. These institutions have ideas of what they should give to children that can contribute to children's social and moral development. In addition, at school a general conception of children and their development will dominate a certain pedagogue's conception of education. The daily practice in the classroom can vary according to pedagogues' differing conceptions of education. There are also temporal variations—for instance, by change of national schools' goals as described in school laws (i.e., the objective of the Danish school law today is to contribute to children's general personality development, contrary to the law from the 1970s).

In Danish schools, as in other Western schools, Jean Piaget's (1970) theory has influenced conceptions of what to expect from children when they enter school (i.e., if children are mature enough to start school and how they should learn mathematics in the early grades). Erik Erikson's (1950) theory of children's development of trust and identity has also influenced the daily practice with children, especially in home and kindergarten, around meals, toilet training, and control of children's sexuality.

Piaget and Erikson's theories have been criticised (i.e., Burman, 1994; Morss, 2001; Riegel, 1975; Walkerdine, 2004; Wartofsky, 1983) for being anchored in specific historical and societal traditions that are not elucidated in their theories. These theories have been both revised and modernised among others by David Stern (1985)[1] and Margaret Donaldson (1992),[2] where the child's social situation is included in the revised theories. These revised theories are still formulated as general theories that count for all children based on human being's special biological heritage. Sociologists (e.g., Corsaro, 1997; James et al., 1997) prefer to substitute this general approach to children's development with research of childhood. I give a short review of these critiques and argue how a cultural–historical approach to a theory of children's development gives better conditions for taking into account the specific social settings of individual children and

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[1]Stern, though he has a psychoanalytic a background, conceptualized the child's actual social situation, starting already in infancy as a now and here situation where the child the caregiver are both intentionally oriented in the social situation. This influences the activities and the child's orientation.

[2]Donaldson has criticized Piaget's theory of preschool children's missing ability to take perspectives, demonstrating how this ability can be related to the social situation and the child's conception of the activity.

the cultural and historical aspects of their everyday living and is also better for catching the diversity in children's actual development.

CRITIQUE OF THEORIES OF CHILD DEVELOPMENT

The Grand Developmental Theories

In early theories of child development, development was viewed either as a result of maturation of inherited characteristics (Gesell, 1948) or an adaptation to societal conditions through learning (Skinner & Harisman, 1941). More recent conceptions of development integrate these views into a conception of the children's development as a combination and modification of inherited characteristics—a realization of inborn qualities through societal adaptation.

In their theories, Piaget (1964/1968) and Erikson (1950) characterized development as a process that progresses through a fixed sequence of stages. Thereby children's development is primarily characterized by structure and only modified by the culture and society in which they grow up. These two researchers acknowledged though that culture and society can influence the pace with which the stages are realized and if the last stages of development are ever reached. Both Piaget's and Erikson's theories are dominated by the following characteristics: (a) development is seen as *general*—applicable for *all* children, whether this is the explicit ambition or just the result of an unreflected ethnocentric perspective; (b) development is seen as *natural*, whether as a biological *adaptation* or as an adaptation to situational circumstances; and (c) the process of development and change is understood as an evolution toward a *naturally given end*. Lacking in both their theories is a view of children's development as influenced by *norms, values, and power relations*—for who is the development important, desirable, and even moral? Also lacking is a view of children as not only adapting but also constructing and *producing the conditions* of their own living. Moreover, the *consequences* of the traditional concepts of development are the production and realization of practices in institutions that are viewed as natural and therefore are not critically reflected on.

Theoretical Deconstruction of Child Development

Outstanding researchers within this approach have been John Morss and Erica Burman. Morss has argued for a deconstruction of developmental psychology especially with a focus on the concept of stages and age periods. He argued that children can take responsibility for their own choices and that there is no beginning age at which children can take on this responsibility; instead, he characterizes different age periods as different lifestyles (Morss, 2001). This deconstruction of development and redefining stages into lifestyles takes away adults' responsibility to care for children's activities and their well-being. To neglect this responsibility puts too heavy a burden on a single child.

This can be exemplified with change of practice in Danish institutions where these types of theories are now influential in the discourse about education and development. The Danish society saves money because there can be more children in the different institutions (i.e., kindergarten and after-school day care institutions). In kindergarten this has (in several cases) been formulated as the child's responsibility for self-administration. Therefore, the pedagogues

do not need to play with the children—free play is the positive discourse and the number of adults can be reduced. Pernille Hviid (2001) and Ivy Schousboe (2001) demonstrated in their research that children in kindergarten and after-school institutions miss adult engagement and involvement in their activities if the pedagogue becomes too passive (or if there are too few caretakers).

Erica Burman also argued for a deconstruction of developmental psychology, but the deconstruction she has advocated is directed against traditional research of child development rather than discrediting that theories of child developmental are relevant. The normative and ideological aspects of the dominant theories have been her concern; she pointed out which interests they serve rather than throwing out the idea of a psychology of child development. She sees the importance of a developmental psychology for the professional and his or her practice with children. She wrote,

> Developmental psychological knowledge informs a number of professional practices, such as health, education and welfare that touch everybody's lives. In particular, it forms part of the knowledge base for health visiting and social work as well as education and law. For example, on what basis do law courts arrive at an understanding of what constitute a child's 'best interests'? What underlies an education welfare officer's opinion that a child's 'social and emotional needs' will be better catered for outside mainstream school? What criteria do adoption agencies use in evaluating whether or not an adoption is likely to be successful? This is some of the ways developmental psychology reverberates far beyond the theory or in the experimental laboratory, as well as beyond the pages of child advice magazines and toyshops. (Burman, 1994, pp. 4–6)

So whereas Burman wanted to deconstruct the "grand developmental theories" of child psychology because of the problems mentioned earlier, she acknowledged developmental psychology as important for everyday practice with children (though she does not propose a new theory).

Theories About Childhood as Societal Construction

Several anthropologists and sociologists (James, Jenks, Prout, Corssaro, Qvortrup, and others) have criticized the "grand development" theories and taken the same stand as the deconstruction approach: that development should be anchored in everyday practice in time and space. However, they go one step further than the deconstruction approach and suggest research on childhood should focus on children within different societal settings.

Philippe Aries's book (1960/1982) about the history of childhood is one of the classic works of childhood history that has been used to support this construction of childhood as an alternative to developmental psychology (Gittin, 2004). According to Aries, historical studies of childhood as an alternative to adulthood is a modern construction.

What the new childhood approach can lead to is a coherent understanding of different childhoods in different historical periods. Without having concepts to analyze different points of view (especially the children's) and having only a narrow focus on societal conditions, a psychological approach to development as a continuing qualitative change that the child contributes to himself or herself is impossible. With this limited view an important conception of children as co-constructors of their own developmental conditions is lost, a point that the philosopher Marx Wartofsky has stressed very much.

Arguments for a Constructive Theory of Child Development

Marx Wartofsky has criticized Piaget's theory for not viewing child development as a societal historical activity and pointed out that developmental psychology is constructed because of the need of society. His main point is that both the child and the world construct each other (Wartofsky, 1983). He has not dismissed the concept of stages in his critique. On the contrary, Wartofsky (1994) argued that from a philosophical point of view the concept of stages in development is unavoidable. He pointed out that every developmental theory is normative;[3] these norms are anchored in the traditions and moral views of those who formulate the developmental model. These norms can be identified in the categories describing development and in the outline of stages:

> [Stages are] connected through causal and conditional relation to each other (in that one results from or is brought about by another). Here one may speak of "laws" of development in terms of canonical or epigenetically ordered sequences of such stages, where such sequences are law-like in that they are taken as necessary and universal for all cases of a given domain. (Wartofsky, 1994, p. 231)

Wartofsky also pointed out that one cannot use a general or content free conception of developmental stages, so the question becomes, development of what? The content of development specifies the causal and conditional relations.

The question is then, Is it possible to have a general theory of children's development, or do we need a theory for every small psychological domain? My own view is that the vantage one takes from a theory about stages in children's development depends on what one sees as the leading problem and central concepts.

A theoretical approach can have variations within it, as is exemplified by Vygotsky (1998), El'konin (1999), and Fel'dshtein's (1987) diverse cultural–historical theories of development. Each theory differs in its characterization of stages because each theory differs in the leading questions of what is developing. However, because they build on the same preconceptions and their questions are anchored in the same theoretical approach they can supplement each other well.

Vygotsky focused on the development of the child's mind and focused on the zone of proximal development and crises in the social situation of development. El'konin focused on how a child's motives and cognitive development was related to a child's trajectory through different institutional practices. Fel'dshtei focused on the child's social relations in the social situation. All three researchers, in their theories, take the child's social situation into consideration, but their focuses differ and their formulations of stages in children's development are not identical to one another.

CHILDREN'S ACTIVITY IN EVERYDAY LOCAL SETTINGS AS FOUNDATION FOR THEIR DEVELOPMENT

The focus I choose for a cultural–historical theory of children's development is children's activities in everyday practice. Children's projects, their intentions, their everyday practices, and their

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[3]A statement that was also found in Erica Burman's conception of development (see the earlier citation; Burman, 1994, p. 6).

interactions with other persons in this everyday practice are key concepts in the cultural–historical theory of development that I outline.

The following formulation of children's development is the result of these analyses and is argued for in the following.

Children develop through participating in everyday activities in societal institutions, but neither society nor its institutions (i.e., families, kindergarten, school, youth clubs, etc.) are static; rather, they change over time in a dynamic interaction between a person's activities, institutional practice, societal traditions and discourse, and material conditions. Several types of institutional practices in a child's social situation influence that child's life and development. At the same time children's development can be seen as sociocultural tracks through different institutions. Children's development is marked by crises, which are created when change occurs in the child's social situation via biological changes, changes in everyday life activities and relations to other persons, or changes in material conditions.

The important conceptions in a cultural–historical theory of child development of children's everyday activities are then:

- Child development takes place through a child's initiating or entering into activities in societal institutions.
- Each person's development takes place as a sociocultural trajectory through different institutional practices. A track has multiple ways depending of the child's biology, the material conditions, and the cultural traditions and norms of the society and its institutions.
- How a child's trajectory is realized in a life course in local settings can lead to crises in the child's social situation.
- When the dominating practices of the child's everyday life changes, the leading motive of the child will change; this change can be seen as a stage in the child's development.
- Norms that guide institutional practices and children's development are connected to conceptions of a good life and these conceptions can vary within the different types of institutions. The most central for children in Western societies are family, day care, school, and youth education.

Participation in Institutionalized Practice

Children develop through participation in institutionalized practices that are characterized by communication and shared activities. These forms of practice initiate but also restrict children's activities and thereby become conditions for their development. How this unfolds for a child in a local setting I have already illustrated with the example of Jens's kindergarten activities.

To describe and understand the conditions for a child's development one has to ask what kind of societal institutions do children in modern society participate in? What activities dominate these institutions? What demands do they put on children and what kind of crises do children go through when changing from one institution to the next?

To illustrate these conceptions I propose the following model in Figure 1 depicting the conditions for children's learning and development. The central perspectives in this model are state, institution, and individual. Children's development can be viewed from all three perspectives.
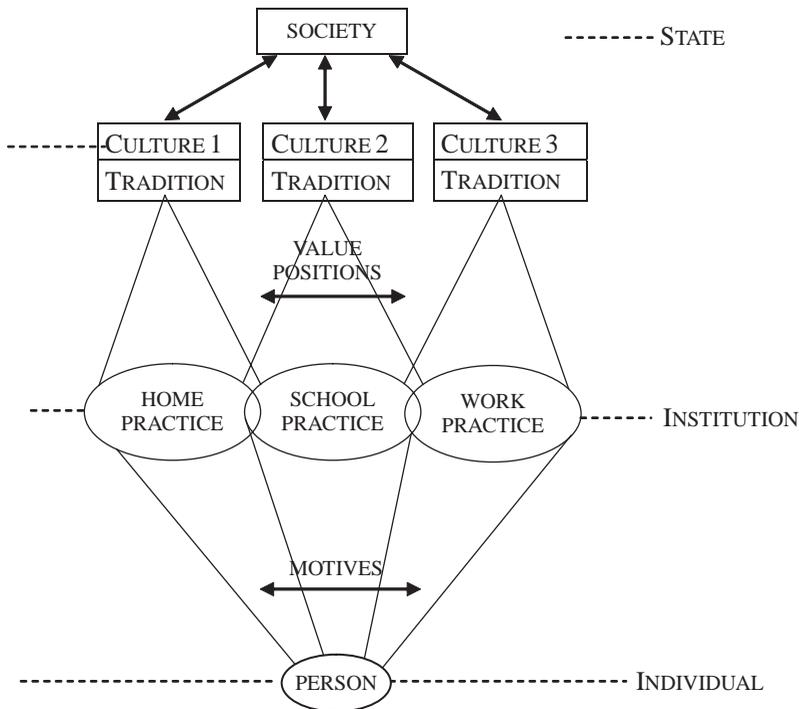
FIGURE 1 A model of children's learning and development through participation in institutionalized practice.

The state perspective contains the historically developed context for a society, where the state apparatus, in the form of laws, statutory instruments, and institutionalization of practices, gives frames for children and youth's participations in activities.

The institutional perspective's concern is about everyday practice in institutions. This everyday practice has to be seen as knotting together traditions and values with personal motives and competences. Within or across institutions one can find more or less permanent groups that can be seen as *arenas for activities* (i.e., friendship groups).

The individual's perspective catches the single person as an actor with special needs, projects, and motives in the everyday life, participating in several institutions. (This model is discussed further in Hedegaard, 1999.)

The example of the kindergarten child, Jens, that I outlined earlier offers both the institutional and the individual perspectives. If we look at the case from the state perspective we can see it as containing the conditions the society provides for practices in a kindergarten and for children's activities there, that is, in the form of juridical and economical conditions. The state determines who can be educated at kindergarten, how this should be done, and in what ways the kindergarten should serve its citizens. This influences the local practice and the activities that the kindergarten boy, Jens, and his mates can engage in. The education of the kindergarten pedagogue and the tradition she relates to posit that in kindergarten there is no formal learning and that children can be picked up by parents at different times. In the concrete case it is late in the

afternoon and the pedagogue is alone with two children, trying to live up to the practices of informal activities in Danish kindergarten. Discourse of educational theories also influence her activities—as mentioned earlier the dominant discourse in Denmark related to this concrete setting was that of nondirection activity and coziness. This tradition has been changing, however, as new laws were formulated in 2005 for educational practices, having an influence on the activities all the way down to child. An example is that in 2005 the social ministry in Denmark made new plans for a new practice in kindergarten, where formal learning plans and pedagogue-planned activities are forwarded. This change is influencing educational practice in Danish kindergarten as well as the developmental conditions for children in kindergarten. Whether this is a good or bad thing depends on what one finds to be beneficial, the state's economical growth or the welfare of its young citizens.

In the research approach I take to study children's development my central focus is the practice of everyday life in different institutions as depicted in model in Figure 1. A child is seen as participating in several institutions at the same time. The societal perspective has to be conceptualized as giving conditions for these different practices.

Developmental Trajectories and Children's Development

The main point in using the concept of trajectories in relation to the conceptualization of development is that society, with its material and institutional conditions, provides the possibilities for a person's psychological development. From a life course perspective a child's participation in different institutions changes as she or he finishes some and enters new ones, thereby dominating activities in a person's life change over time.

Developmental trajectories have been used by a number of researchers. Riegel (1975), Elder (1997), and Vygotsky (1998) have, in different ways, outlined types of trajectories that interact throughout a person's life course. Riegel described four developmental trajectories: the inner-biological, the individual-psychological, the cultural-sociological, and the outer physical. Riegel also outlined a matrix for how conflicts between these different developmental lines can be positive or negative for a person's general development.[4]

Elder (1998) also referred to different developmental trajectories (pp. 1–2) in his life span theory and how they contribute to a person's life course. Two central points to Elder's (1997) theory of person's life course development are (a) the notion that societal trajectories are historical and not stable, changing over generations, and (b) that people who have similar social and cultural life conditions will have differing life courses because of the different timing of events.

Missing in Riegel and Elder's theories of developmental trajectories is the concept of practice through which the interaction takes place. Their points about historical anchoring, timing, and conflictual interaction in a life course are important but not sufficient for understanding the specific child. Their theories are structural theories that cannot specify interactions between

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[4]Riegel offered some examples of the negative effects of conflicts. One example is of children who have a handicap and whose biological development is out of sync with their psychological development. Other examples are related to cultural traditions, such as the use of child labor or marriage of young female children. In these cases neither the children's biological nor psychological trajectories match the societal trajectories. I argue that to understand the psychological effect of this for development, there needs to be one more step in the analyses that takes changes in the child's social situation into consideration.

people and how new social relations are formed and what characterizes a child's concrete social situation.

By using the concept of the child's social situation Vygotsky (1998, pp. 198–199) pointed to the system of relations between a child of a given age and the social conditions for his or her activity. However, even Vygotsky did not formulate the importance of the concrete practices that realize social trajectories. One needs to take another step and take the concrete activities a child is part of and to which she or he contributes into consideration, thereby combining the general conceptions of developmental trajectories with the concrete practice.

The child's social interactions have to be seen as the mediating link between the child's biological maturation and the institutional demands in the child's social situation. This interaction can lead to conflicts and to crises for the child in her everyday activities. The general conceptions of developmental trajectories have to be integrated with the child's concrete activities and social relations in institutional practices. Only through this integration will it be possible to understand how differentiation in child development proceeds.

The Zone of Proximal Development and Crises in Children's Development

Vygotsky forwarded two dynamic concepts that lead to change in a child's development: imitation and crisis. Imitation is connected to his concept of the zone of proximal development. Crisis is connected to his theory of periods in child development.

The zone of proximal development points to the phenomena that, intellectually, a child can always do more with the help of a more competent person than he or she could do alone. This is accomplished through imitation. This ability to imitate is not limitless but will change corresponding to the child's development so that at each age level the child will have a specific zone of intellectual imitation connected with the actual level of development. Here it is important to note Vygotsky's (1998) remark:

> Speaking of imitation, we do not have in mind a mechanical, automatic thoughtless imitation but sensible imitation based on understanding the imitative caring out of some intellectual operation . . . . Everything that the child cannot do independently, but which he can be taught or which he can do with direction or cooperation or with the help of leading questions, we will include in the sphere of imitation. (p. 202)

Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development has influenced different researcher's conceptions of children as participants in shared social practice. Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development has been central for understanding the importance of social relations for children's learning and development in everyday settings, but the concept is too narrow to count for change of developmental periods. Vygotsky (1998, p. 196) used the concept of crises in the child's social situation.

Vygotsky's theory of crises in the child's social situation goes further than the concept of conflicts Riegel (1975) outlined in the matrix of common conflicts that can arise between the different types of trajectories (i.e., if the biological and the psychological trajectory does not match). Conflicts, in Riegel's terminology, can be understood from several perspectives—the society's, the institution's, and the child's—in relation to practice. Crises have to be characterized from the participant's perspective. Conflicts that can be found in a child's social situation

between the different values that are connected to practice in different institutions (i.e., family and school) can turn into a crisis when the conflict is related to the child's social situation, which means that the conflict is between different wishes or orientations that the child has in concrete settings. Similarly, conflicts can arise between a child's motives and the dominating motives in an institution.

According to Vygotsky, conflicts become crises when the child's relation to another person changes. For example, a 1-year-old child who starts to walk changes his or her relation to the people that care for him or her by becoming mobile in a new way. This new relation demands that the caregivers provide the child with space within which he or she can explore his or her growing new capacity. Crises between a child's motives and the institution's motives can appear both because children gain new competencies and because children change biologically.

Three parts define Vygotsky's (1998) conceptualization of developmental crises: deconstruction, construction, and mastering. Mastering is characterized by what Vygotsky called central neo-formation. Vygotsky outlined the three parts where the deconstruction and reconstruction of new competencies, strategies, and motives that are important for children change into new developmental stages. Vygotsky stated that these changes imply that the child's personality as a whole is changing. He wrote that it is not partial aspects of the child's consciousness that change but the general structure of consciousness that at each given age is characterized mainly by certain systems of relations and dependences between separate aspects and separate forms of individual activity.

The child in the first example in this article, Jens, was in conflict with the pedagogue. This conflict can be seen as some sort of crises for Jens. Jens came into conflict with the pedagogue's book selection even though Jen's likes to be read to. The pedagogue could see that Jens was reluctant to come into the reading activity; she tried to make the session cozy, as pedagogues use to do in kindergarten: by taking a child into their lap or by putting their arms around a child. Instead of being calmed down, Jens went wild and ran away. This reaction can be understood if we see how Jens oriented himself motivationally toward school competence. Jens was starting a transition between kindergarten and school because at home he was becoming oriented toward school. My guess is that if in kindergarten the pedagogues orient their support toward Jens's school activities then he can come through the crises as a motivated boy and orient toward acquiring school competence. I also guess that he then can sit quietly and orient himself toward being cozy with the adults, though in another way than generally found in kindergarten practice.

According to Vygotsky, crises do not appear solely because of an external change. First, when the child enters into a new relation to other people in her everyday life crises can arise between the child's own motives and the motives and values of others in the social situation.

Institutional Practice and Stages in Development

Development of children's motives is the central aspect in El'konin's theory and is related to dominating institutions and their practices. El'konin's (1999) theory of child development elaborates Vygotsky's view of periods in children's development. El'konin relates children's developmental periods in a society to the dominating institutions in the society. Each developmental stage in a child's life course has to be seen in relation to the everyday practice the child participates in at the time it was leading for the child's activities. For El'konin, changes in the dominating practice in which the child's everyday activities take place lead to qualitative

changes in the leading motives for a child's everyday activities. There is a biological foundation for being human that traditions in a society can realize very differently. Stages in a child's development in the Western nation-states are then connected to the practice traditions in modern society with its organizations around upbringing, school, and preparation for professional work in society. These traditions become the foundations for children's development of motives and competencies in this type of society.

El'konin described a dialectic relation between development of motives and competence. Children, by participating in institutional practice, are expected to appropriate the dominant motives of an institution as leading motives for their own activities. Children's motivational development always precedes their appropriation of competencies and strategies when entering into new developmental stages, but a child's earlier motives and competencies influence how new motives develop and also which activities children become oriented toward when entering new practices.

In Jens's case we saw that he was already motivated for school activity. However, we can also find preschool children that are not motivated for school activity. Conflict and crises can cause children to develop motives and coping mechanisms. However, they can also be detrimental to children, as can be seen in the following case of a Turkish Danish student who developed a strategy of silence and withdrawal.

Ideas of the Good Life in Different Institutional Practices

Ideas of the good life are important for a theory of development from a practice perspective. In an institution the activities that dominate are anchored in traditions that sometimes are explicated as goals (i.e., in schools). Goals for educational practice are formulated to create a good life for its participants under the conditions that the specific type of institution gives; however, the goals do not always function in this way.

If we accept El'konin's theory, that institutions are facilitators through their dominating practice for qualitative change in children's development, a child's developmental stage has to be evaluated in relation to the ideas of what constitutes a good life—ideas that are anchored in the practice of the institutions in which a child lives his everyday life. A person's everyday life is not only connected to one institution but usually is lived across different institutions, as both Jens's case and the next example, Halime's case, illustrate. Even in early childhood, a child is connected to more than the close family. Grandparents and the extended family influence the practice that the child meets, even if only during infancy and early childhood. Other institutions in childhood are more indirectly connected to the child's everyday life, such as health care institutions and, for some families, religious institutions, which provide norms and values for a good life.

Children from families with other traditions at home than the traditions that dominate the educational institutions sometimes meet conflicting practices, norms, and values.

Halime's example comes from a research project in which young people (16–17 years old) from Turkish immigrant families, after completing the whole Danish school education, told about their experiences.

Halime's Case

When Halime came to Denmark she had already attended school for 2 years in Turkey (where they start at age 5). When she started in the Danish school she was the same age as the Danish

children, but she had to attend a "preparation class" to learn Danish for 1 year and then she went directly to second grade. From second to ninth grade only two other foreign students attended Halime's class, and so the number of foreigners in her class did not cause her problem; on the contrary, her conflict was caused by the fact that her teachers did not understand her problems with her family. Halime remembered her 1st school year in the early grades as being very good, but this changed when new subjects were introduced in middle school.

First day in school
H: A nice day, all my schoolmates were very interested in me. They asked what my name was and how old I was because I was a year older than they were. They asked me if I could speak Turkish and if I would say something in Turkish. They were extremely sweet towards me.
 I: Yes, that was when you had just started.
H: Yes, they were extremely interested in me.
 I: So you didn't feel that they treated you differently or badly?
H: No, no!
 I: How did it continue?
H: Gradually, when we grew older, one could say that I was left out because I was Turkish. When we were small, we didn't know anything about races and all that. When we grew older they noticed the Turks who had moved to Denmark, and they saw that we were different. One could also hear it by listening to us.
 I: Did you have any difficulties getting friends?
H: No, but they were cold toward me, you see, so I couldn't go and be warm toward them, so I had to keep to myself, and be outside, but I also had some Turkish friends.

Camp
H: No, so I was not given permission to go when we were to visit Prague in ninth grade and in seventh grade when we were to visit a city in Denmark. My parents didn't give me permission either.
 I: What did you do when you heard that you were not allowed to go?
H: Actually, I cried.
 I: Did you cry in school?
H: No, actually not, I told my schoolmates directly that I couldn't go, but that I didn't know why. I told it very coldly. They asked me "Why don't you ask why?" and I said I didn't want to because then I would get into a fight with my father. So I had to say that I could not go on the tour; there was nothing more to say.
 I: How did the teachers react?
H: They asked me if I couldn't ask again, they just wanted to have me with them on the trip. I told them I could understand that, but that I didn't want to fight with my father. "You have to accept that I cannot go."
 I: Was the teacher rough, did they say that you had to go because it is part of the schooling?
Y: Actually, because I told them that I didn't care, they threatened to throw me out of the school. I said that they could just do it, because I didn't care any longer. But of course they are not allowed to do this, since it is not up to me to decide if I can go, so they didn't do it.

Last days in school
H: By the time we had to leave ninth grade we made a book for the class and we had to write in the book what we thought of each other, and they wrote about me that I was very sweet. One of the girls, who wanted to be a designer, wrote that she promised me that the first dress she designed she would give to me, so that I could wear it the first time. Others wrote that I should talk more, but they all wrote nice things about me, because I was not mean, but I didn't speak that much with them.

It is as if the pressure Halime felt during her school years from teachers, her classmates, and parents made her too silent.

> *Self-conceptions*
>   I: You were a bit isolated?
>   H: Yes I was actually, so they just told me to speak up more.
>   H: My teacher in Danish had written that I was doing well, only I should just talk more, and that he knew that I could if I wanted to.
>   I: Why didn't you talk that much in class? I can understand that you didn't talk that much with your classmates, because they didn't treat you so well you said, but why didn't you speak up more in class?
>   H: I don't really know, and I'm sorry now that I didn't speak up more because I know that I can if I want to; I don't really know why I didn't say that much.
>   I: Was the language a hindrance?
>   H: No, actually not.
>   I: You think that you mastered the Danish language?
>   H: Yes, of course, if the teacher asked me to give a review about a chapter, I could do this easily and he thought it was good, you see.
>   I: So it was not the language?
>   H: No, no this has never been any problem to me.
>   I: No, so it is only your personality?
>   H: Yes, it is actually.

Halime's social situation in school.   For Halime, she could not give into the demands from her teachers and schoolmates, which reflected her own wishes, if she was to respect her parents' value positions. The social conditions for participating in school practice left her with few possibilities for activity and for developing her own value positions. She became withdrawn in relation to her schoolmates and became angry with her parents, which she expressed indirectly many times.

The norms and values for practice in different institutions has to be understood to see the possibilities they give children for learning though participating in institutional practices and related to the dominant motives in these institutional practices. In Halime's case, the norms and values in her home, that is, her parents' values and norms were still oriented toward the society they had left (Turkey). They did not accept the Danish values in school for different activities and therefore did not allow Halime to participate as a full member of the practice in school. She wanted to participate, as we can see because she cried when she was left out and felt sorry that she restricted herself in relation to her schoolmates. The crisis she had in middle school, that between wanting to obey her parents and wanting to be with her schoolmates in their social activities and school travels, made her silent and cold toward her schoolmates, even though she actually wanted to have warm relations with them. She followed the trajectory that her parents laid out for her middle-school-aged Turkish girl even though she lived in a society with far more possibilities.

A good everyday life—for instance, in school—is not so simple for a school child who has a family background that is different from other children, such as children from immigrant and refugee families.

Through participation, interaction, and communication in everyday institutional practices, a child appropriates cultural values, motives, and ways of acting. The good life is determined by

norms and values that are interwoven in different cultural traditions in the institutions where the person's daily activities take place. It is also determined by the society that frames these institutions and gives the conditions for everyday life within the institutions.

Development is a process that integrates the person's development of competencies with values. To include values as part of a theory of development gives educators and caregivers the possibility to evaluate if the valued competencies have been appropriated and if a child has a suitable and acceptable motive orientation in relation to the institutional practice.

CONCLUSION ABOUT THE METHODOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE OUTLINED DEVELOPMENTAL THEORY

The aim of this article was to outline a theory of child development that combines the ideas of childhood theories with the central concepts of practice norms and values of a cultural–historical approach to psychology.

These conceptions of development that I have outlined here have implications for methodological considerations in child-development research. I conclude then that when doing research with children one should consider:

- The practice tradition of the institution where the child lives his or her everyday life.
- The norms and values of caregivers and educators in the everyday practices they share with children.
- Demands in upbringing and education and how children meet in these shared activities.
- To understand what these demands of upbringing and education mean for the child's development they have to be viewed from the child's perspective (i.e., related to the child's intentions).
- The interaction and conflicts between the child's goal-oriented activities and parents/educators demands point to what is happening developmentally for the child.
- The conflict that a child can end up in when trying to realize his or her intentions and goals while trying to show consideration for his or her parents' and educators'/teachers' demands and wishes can result in developmental learning.

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