

Social Competence in Developmental Perspective

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Social Competence in Developmental Perspective

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Preface

What determines the focus of a researcher's interest, the sources of inspiration for a study, or the variables scrutinized? If we were to examine the antecedents of these decisions, they would surely emerge as accidents of circumstance--the personal experiences of the researcher, the inspiration of early mentors, the influence of contemporary colleagues--all tempered by the intellectual currents that nurture the researcher's hypotheses. Among the accidents that mold the careers of researchers is geographic location. The culture in which a research program emerges helps determine both its very subject and its method.

The primary purpose of this book is to assist those interested in the scientific study of children's social competence in transcending the boundaries imposed both by geography and by selective exposure to the highly diverse schools of thought that have led to interest in this field. Most of these ideas were presented and exchanged at an Advanced Study Institute entitled "Social Competence in Developmental Perspective" held in Savoie, France, in July 1988. This Institute was attended by scholars from France, England, Northern Ireland, Germany, Italy, Norway, Spain, Portugal, Netherlands, Canada, the United States and Brazil. Those who participated will recognize that the metamorphosis from lecture to chapter has necessitated many changes. In order to accommodate the reader who may be unfamiliar with the field, more attention has been paid here to identifying the theoretical contexts of the research described. The presentation of empirical data in the chapters that follow is more selective, guided by the need to support recurring arguments and illustrate frequent themes. The intent here is to equip the reader to better appreciate the contents of professional journals in this area, not to usurp the function of an empirical journal. Finally, many of the positions argued herein have been refined as a result of contact with each other at the Institute.

Both newcomers to the field and veterans will be struck by the heterogeneity of the contributions that follow. One must reflect upon the many pathways that have led to interest in social relations in order to understand adequately this heterogeneity. The following enumeration of the roots of the work presented throughout the book is by no means exhaustive.

Personality theory. Early opponents of Freudian personality theory attributed much of human behavior to peer experience. "Social interest" is a primary motivating force in Adler's system, while feelings of inferiority are seen as underlying much psychopathology. Though Adler did not dispute Freud's view that the core of an individual's personality is determined in early childhood, his open parent/child guidance sessions may have helped to demystify the process of applying psychological principles in promoting mental health in communities; subsequent efforts in this regard have focused on enhancing peer relations (Ansbacher & Ansbacher, 1956). Moreno's (1934) sociometric technique emphasized the diversity of roles played by individuals within various social systems. It influenced both research and psychotherapy.

Erikson (1950) achieved an integration of psychoanalytic theory with the influences of peers and society at large. Harry Stack Sullivan (1953) is perhaps most responsible for the inclusion of peer influence in personality theory. He emphasized the individual's need for friendships and more intimate relationships. In the process, he underscored the developmental perspective far more than any predecessor. Within his system, the crucial

personal tasks faced by an individual differ fundamentally according to age and stage of development.

Child development. Personality theorists such as Sullivan adopted a developmental model as part of the process of tracing adult personality features back through child and adolescent experience. In contrast, scholars in the area of developmental psychology have increasingly adopted a life-span perspective and, in doing so, seek to identify which behaviors are specific to a particular stage and which are more enduring. This life-span perspective was not unknown to pioneers in the field. Systematic longitudinal investigations designed to elucidate continuities between child and adult behavior (e.g., Northway, 1944) were launched in the years between the two world wars. Children's social interaction was studied by means of direct observation and peer assessment in child development laboratories established on the campuses of North American universities (Hartup, 1985; Jack, 1934). These techniques have survived to this day as mainstays of research methodology. Piaget's many insights into the development of children's thinking had a profound impact on the peer relations field. He demonstrated important developmental differences in the ways children think about others and about the rules constraining interpersonal behavior. Theory-building in the field of children's development was further revolutionized by the views of the Soviet theorists Vygotsky and Lurie, who explored the complex cognitive and linguistic mechanisms that mediate children's interactions with their environments.

Human ethology. Inspired by evolutionary theory, ethologists have employed observational methods to study the group behavior of various species. Such processes as affiliation, aggression, and dominance have figured prominently in their work. The extension of this type of inquiry to the peer relations of children was a logical one. Furthermore, much recent ethological research with non-human primates has focused on individual differences in patterns of interaction between young primates and their peers, as well as the link between these interactions and aspects of the offsprings' interaction with their parents.

Social psychology. Interpersonal attraction, leadership and attitudes towards others have been key variables in the social psychology literature since its beginning. More recent thinking in social psychology has also considered more intimate friendships and close relationships. Argyle and colleagues (Argyle, 1967) conducted detailed studies of the rules that govern human relationships and applied this research in helping individuals seeking to establish and enhance friendships. However, social psychological theory has not been traditionally widely applied in the study of children's behavior.

Preventive mental health. While the fields of medicine and clinical psychology have traditionally restricted their role to the treatment of disorders once they arise, attention has increasingly been paid to the need for preventing disorder and to the factors associated with successful adaptation in the face of adversity (Garmez & Rutter, 1983). Because unsuccessful peer relations are often a forerunner of psychological maladjustment, and because satisfying interpersonal relationships may assist individuals in overcoming the stresses of an otherwise pathogenic situation, children's social competence relations have attracted the keen interest of the preventive mental health movement.

Systems theory. Awareness of the reciprocal influences of children, families, schools, subcultures and societies has increased within several of the disciplines already described, especially child development, social psychology, and preventive mental health. Bronfenbrenner (1977) criticized developmental psychology's failure to consider the context in which child development occurs. Albee (1986) emphasized the impact of adverse socioeconomic conditions on an individual's psychological well-being.

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Self-concept theory. Scholars in psychology and education, as well as laypersons, have been profoundly aware of children's images of themselves and the impact of self-concept on behavior. Some have considered self-concept the core of human personality (Lecky, 1945). Theorists are nearly unanimous in emphasizing the social origin of self-concept (see, e.g. Cooley 1902; Harter, 1983) and have thus spurred the study of children's peer relations.

Behavior therapy. Procedures derived from learning theory have been used extensively to assist youngsters with maladaptive peer relations. Behavior analysts have also contributed greatly to the refinement of observational methods in studying children's peer interaction, because stringent observational data are generally used to document the effectiveness of this type of intervention. Because the basic principles of classic S-R (Stimulus-Response) theory do not vary according to age or stage, a developmental perspective has not characterized this field in the past. However, greater awareness of developmental factors will surely emerge as the field of behavior therapy continues its current flirtation with the study of the cognitive and affective influences on behavior.

Thus, scholars whose interests have converged on children's peer relations hail from diverse intellectual heritages. One would imagine that these different schools of thought might operate as warring camps vigorously debating the validity of each other's work. This is hardly the case. The varying approaches reflect differences in background and interest, their idiosyncratic characteristics nurtured in part by isolation. Lack of contact, but not lack of respect, should be inferred from the heterogeneity described above. Though these highly varied theoretical backgrounds do not distribute strictly according to nationality, there are striking differences in the relative influence of each as one crosses international boundaries. The principles of behavior therapy, for instance, are predominant in the basic training of psychologists in North America, but not in Continental Europe. In contrast, European researchers are much more familiar with ethological approaches than most of their American counterparts. International exchange has facilitated the growth of the field to a certain extent. For example, the psychologies of Adler and Moreno, introduced above, originated in Europe, and were transported to America as part of the great upheaval that accompanied the two world wars. Peacetime exchanges among colleagues have of course occurred, albeit they are often hampered by insufficient familiarity with the basic vocabulary, methodology, and biases of psychological research in other countries. It is hoped that the exchanges of ideas documented in this volume will help remedy this state of affairs.

The purpose of this book is to facilitate communication among these approaches, not to attempt a contrived synthesis of highly disparate interests and methods. The reader is invited to appreciate the individuality and internal logic of each approach as well as its contribution to the study of children's social behavior. Nevertheless, there are a number of recurring issues and common problems. Many of the contributors decry--and some attempt to resolve--the enduring obstacle imposed by the lack of consensus on the definition of social competence and skill. The need for a systems perspective, already introduced, is evident in chapters devoted to conceptual issues, descriptive research and applied intervention alike. Similarly, there is considerable attention throughout to the difficulties in accurately measuring children's social competence and the problems this poses in interpreting research findings of all types. However, the central theme is the need for greater awareness of developmental issues in social development research. The importance of a developmental perspective sounds obvious, almost proverbial. The most pressing need in this regard is not to lament the deficiencies of previous research but to determine how, where, and when to incorporate considerations of age, stage, and gender differences, among others, in building theories and designing research. Ideas along these lines are contained in several of the chapters that follow.

This book is divided into five sections, each of which begins with an editorial introduction. In Section I, entitled *Social Competence in Developmental Perspective: Conceptual Issues*, the importance of social competence is discussed and reaffirmed. Several important theoretical problems are addressed, including the definition of social competence and its relation to general adaptive ability. Important methodological dimensions, especially with respect to longitudinal investigations, are introduced. Section II is devoted to the *Emergence of Social Competence in Early Childhood*. It contains deliberations as to the nature of the child's first social contacts and descriptions of the rapidly evolving forms of social exchange during the preschool years. Section III is a selective examination of *Ongoing Social Development in Middle Childhood and Adolescence*. Special consideration is given to the impact of actual and pretend aggression on relations among peers. *Setting Factors in Children's Social Development: The Influences of Families and Schools* are considered in Section IV. Separate chapters within that section present evidence for the effects of families and schools on the social interaction of both preschoolers and school-age children. The final section of the book, *Translating Theory Into Practice: Social Competence Promotion Programs*, focuses on applied interventions based on social development research. In addition to the full-length chapters, several brief conversation summaries, based on discussions by participants at the Institute, have been included in order to clarify selected crucial issues. The appendices contain abstracts of individual studies conducted by participants at the Institute.

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We hope that this book facilitates international collaboration among scientists in the peer relations field, and that the fruits of these collaborative endeavors enhance the peer relations of colleagues in many countries and the children with whom they work.

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