

BOOK REVIEWS: Review Essay

The Origins of You: How Childhood Shapes Later Life
By Jay Belsky, Avshalom Caspi, Terrie Moffitt, & Richie Poulton
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The Origins of You. How Childhood Shapes Later Life provides a potentially new landscape for our understandings of human development. Belsky, Caspi, Moffitt, & Poulton (2020) paint a portrait of human development that is complex and probabilistic with clearly identified, traceable data sources. In the introduction, they question traditional chronological documentation of human (specifically child) development based on earlier theoretical models (e.g., Piaget, see, Erickson, 1963; Müller, Carpendale, Smith, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978). They acknowledge that much of the research is based in Western, educated, industrialized, rich, democracies (WEIRD¹) and call for more research which pays attention to diverse cultures and communities. They tackle the central question: How, and, in what ways does childhood shape later life?

The authors answer this question by analyzing longitudinal data from the lives of more than 4000 individuals in New Zealand (Dunedin Multidisciplinary Health and Development Study, originated in 1972) (Poulton et al. 2015), the United Kingdom (Environmental Risk Study, n.d.; originated in 1999) and the United States of America (NICHD Study of Early Child Care and Youth Development (2005); originated in 1991). These longitudinal studies are exemplary in relation to the richness of data sets and the possibilities these data have for triangulation. Data sources (across all three studies) include, for example, interviews (with children and parents), home visits which include observations of children and families, DNA samples, assessments of physical and mental health, MRIs, questionnaires, laboratory observations and assessments, and reports (e.g., police). Notable is the extraordinary retention rate of participants (95% of living participants for the Dunedin study and 93% of living participants for the E-Risk study) which contributed to consistent and reliable databases over the duration of the studies. Both the Dunedin and E-Risk studies are ongoing.

The authors focus on the complex and probabilistic nature of human development, pausing to remind readers of variables that might “interfere” with seemingly reliable findings and interactions between genes and environment that cannot be determined with finality (at least, not yet). One example provided concerns the link between harsh punishment in childhood and later aggression. Belsky et al. (2020) note that a variable such as a loving parent might compensate for the effect of a harsh parent, or a variable related to an overly sensitive nervous system may make a child more vulnerable to harsh punishment and later expressions of aggression. For scholars of human development these types of examples reflect Kessen’s (1990) cautions about universal and hierarchical notions of development. For developing scholars of human development, this book is a useful read; it serves as a vehicle for understanding the rich potential of longitudinal research, the historical context of human development and its future directions.

The authors use two metaphors related to collection and analysis of data, the food pantry and meteorology which are particularly useful in thinking about research in human development. The authors describe a pantry

¹ WEIRD is an acronym for western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic societies. This term coined by Henrich, Heine, and Norenzayan (2010) describes findings in psychology that are based on narrow samples drawn from WEIRD societies which traditionally have been viewed as representative of the species. Henrich et al., demonstrate through their research that these samples are frequent outliers in relation to the rest of the population.

filled with data sets (some selected for specific reasons, others selected for potential usefulness) that allow researchers to play with different variables and interactions that were not necessarily planned but that emerged in a post-hoc fashion as the project progressed. They emphasize the power of observational, longitudinal data that provide prospective (rather than retrospective) findings about human development. Using meteorology as a metaphor, they reiterate the probabilistic (not deterministic) nature of the science of human development. These metaphors and scientific ideas, described in chapter one, lay the cornerstone for exploring the central question of this book; how, and, in what ways does childhood shape later life?

The result of this exploration is a complex and comprehensive understanding of the origins of human development. The authors showcase clear evidence tightly connected to the questions they explore in each chapter, related to, for example, personality interactions, child within the family, child beyond the family in institutions such as day care and school, and the effect of the interplay of genes and environment. They recommend policies that are grounded in the realities of children and families as they encounter institutions and policies of the state. However, as we point out below, these complex, probabilistic findings appear to be grounded in a framework shrouded by unquestioned assumptions and frameworks dating back to the 1970s that do not consider more recent theoretical frameworks of human development.

The evidence presented throughout the text links clearly to the questions the authors ask. Yet, in answering these questions and considering implications, the authors do not address dated standards and assumptions about how children should be raised and the kinds of opportunities they should be afforded. We examine some of these standards and assumptions and posit that because of them the authors fall into the trap of equating child development with school success and then adult success. This, despite Kessen's (1990) cautions around defining development as progress or evolution, and despite the socio-cultural theoretical work done in the field over the last fifty years (see Cole, 1998; Rogoff, 2003; Lave & Wenger, 1993). We conclude with a consideration of a more holistic and inclusive approach, specifically linking development with the capability approach (Nussbaum, 2011; Sen, 1999) which recognizes that children are human beings as opposed to human becomings. This is an approach,

that facilitates people's ability to live lives worth living, by expanding their capability and increasing their real opportunities. Taking the view that people should not be bound by choices determined by others, they [Sen and Nussbaum] claim that people should have a stake in shaping their own lives in a way that respects their agency (Peleg, 2013, p. 529)

The data pantries linked to the Dunedin, E-Risk and the NICHD studies have exciting potential for increasing our understanding of development both longitudinally and cross-culturally. However, that potential must be unpacked in the context of two interrelated underlying ideas in the book. The first has to do with unarticulated theoretical perspectives and assumptions. In using their "data pantry," the authors note that, with few exceptions, they tackle the data without a specific theoretical perspective. However, they also appear to tackle the data with very little examination of their assumptions about class, gender and race/ethnicity which influence the interpretation of the data. Second, the authors do not explore the quandaries of secondary data analysis which of course involves the selection and use of jars of certain data (and not others) from the pantry. Smith (2008) cautions that there is limited consensus on a definition for secondary analysis of data, but it usually involves some form of re-analysis or reporting of existing data which are full of errors, not value neutral, socially constructed, "ludicrously" reduced to "simple numeric terms," and cannot be usefully compared (Smith, 2008, p. 20). Extending the authors' metaphor of the "data pantry" we suggest that a pantry full of processed food may result in unhealthy consequences, no matter which jars get selected.

Belsky et al. (2020) rely on a pantry of data from three different longitudinal studies with one resting on data stretching back to the 1970's derived from even older instruments. The data pantry supplying and shaping the various conclusions in this volume requires more careful scrutiny. We suggest that the authors need to consider the social context in which the data were produced. For example, poverty is a central theme underlying many of the investigations in this volume. Whatever the consequences of poverty, it surely matters to think about the historical context surrounding the collection of data related to poverty. An ideological view of poverty which assigns individual blame versus one that views poverty as systemic will impact the creation of instruments, how data are collected, and how they are interpreted.

For example, a jar of data from the Dunedin pantry, came from Silva et al. (1976), where a scale titled *Mother's Training in Child Development* was used. Interviewers ranked mothers on a scale of one to five depending on how they identified the source of their knowledge of child development (e.g, 1= unaware of where she gained her ideas; 5 = studied child development at either a university or teachers' college). There

are two unquestioned assumptions underlying this scale: one related to socioeconomic status, the other related to cultural values. The shift in value from family knowledge about child rearing to expert knowledge about child rearing (which began in the post-war years of the 1950's) was advantageous to middle-class families who could purchase both the education and the many and varied books dispensing child rearing advice. The scale also inadvertently downplays advice passed from one generation to the next, one of the only ways that child-rearing advice was dispensed prior to "expert" advice. Further, in most non-WEIRD societies, child rearing advice is still valued when passed from one generation to the next because it is more intimate and contextually relevant. Therefore, the authors may implicitly penalize poor parents and parents who have immigrated from non-WEIRD societies based on this hierarchy of child development knowledge.

While the evidence might stay the same, the implications and policy recommendations might be very different in light of these unexamined assumptions. For example, if indeed it turns out that "expert" advice is more beneficial to children's development, policy might consider how to disseminate expert information to families who are poor and/or immigrant rather than simply implying that some parents do not raise their kids as well as others because they lack the expertise (see Lareau, 2011, and Valdés, 1996 for detailed critiques of these ideas). Further, these unexamined assumptions raise the suspicion that the authors have unwittingly lined up child development milestones with school success and success as an adult as opposed to really exploring children's development in its diversity (see Lareau, 2011; Valdés, 1996).

In chapter six, Belsky et al. (2020) investigate a theory proposed earlier by Moffitt about adolescent boys who engage in delinquent behavior that persists into adulthood. Moffitt (2018) suggests that boys who experience neuropsychological problems that impact the development of language, memory and self-control and come from "troubled" low socio-economic status families will demonstrate negative behaviors that are life course persistent (LCP) as opposed to boys who do not have neuropsychological issues and who engage in delinquent behaviors which are limited to adolescence (AL). Belsky et al. (2020) found that LCP boys had younger mothers who spent more time as single parents for the first 11 years of their sons' lives, and were poorer than the mothers of AL boys. Mothers of LCP boys were also less supportive and caring, treated their boys more harshly, and disciplined them less consistently than mothers of AL boys. There was also more conflict in their households.

The two groups of boys were very similar to each other, but they did differ in ways predicted by Moffitt. LCP boys were more violent as adolescents and "had a hostile, alienated, suspicious, and cynical orientation toward others, where AL boys did not" (Belsky et al., 2020, p. 123). The two groups were studied again at age 26 and at age 32. At 26, AL men were still experiencing problems but were more successful in transitioning to adulthood than LCP men. For example, one in five LCP men spent time in prison between the ages of 26 to 32. This was true for one in 20 AL men.

In the conclusion to this chapter, the authors note that interventions with AL boys will prove more promising because they lack the "cumulative life history of problematic development," (Belsky et al., 2020, p. 130) that plagues LCP boys. However, they do not throw in the towel when it comes to LCP boys, and note that "prevention should be multi-faceted, targeting not just different aspects of child development (for example, cognition and temperament), but different contexts as well, including family, childcare and schooling" (p. 130). We applaud the authors' reference to context here, but wonder why they continue to prioritize the individual over the contextual. They discuss responsiveness to efforts at correcting individual behaviors, a policy implication that focuses on the individual as opposed to the social contexts underlying those behaviors. The authors do acknowledge that context interacts with developmental vulnerabilities, but their suggestions always seem to implicate the individual. They echo the poet William Wordsworth's assertion in *My Heart Leaps Up* (1802) that "the child is the father of the man" (Belsky et al., 2020, p. 29) and, once again, this propels the authors to provide interpretations and policy implications from an individualist perspective. We suggest adopting a different perspective to account for social context that may engender a different set of research questions and policy implications. For example, we might investigate the toxic effects of under-resourced schools on LCP boys and AL boys. Additionally, since their results cannot account for all the data, i.e., not all boys experiencing neuropsychological delays, reared by low-income single mothers, etc., develop into LCP adults, policy recommendations can be sharply broadened to consider poverty and schooling.

Examining data from the Early Childcare Study (Chapter 7), the authors found that the more girls were treated harshly during childhood, the earlier they had their first menstrual period. Additionally, it was found that "girls who matured earlier engaged in more sexual risk-taking and sexual behavior than other girls" (Belsky et al., 2020, p. 141). These girls also reported having more sexual partners into their 30's and 40's. The authors use evolutionary biology to explain these findings, and observe adversity in childhood causes the organism to accelerate sexual development to increase the chances of reproductive success.

Here we have many concerns; the validity of the framework, the reliability and validity of the data collected, and the omission of considering the concept of sexual identity in the analysis and interpretation of the findings. In order to use evolutionary biology as a framework to explain these findings, Belsky et al. reject learning theory as a framework, saying (in a remarkably offensive way) that,

girls growing up in fatherless homes are at increased risk of becoming sexually active before other girls, even promiscuous...this way of behaving simply reflects what living with their mothers has taught them—men come and go and can't be trusted but are more inclined to stick around if and when sex is available to them (Belsky et al., 2020, p. 136).

We are left wondering why the authors chose these pervasive misogynist characterizations to reject learning theory as an explanation.

The authors also appear to accept their data at face value. We wonder about the reliability of teenage girls' self-reports of sexual activity given the time frame the data was collected and the social mores around sexually active teenage girls. The authors found that girls in coed schools reported higher rates of sexual activity but do not consider possible threats to their data. We wonder about differences in reliability between girls attending single-sex schools and girls attending coed schools. For example, the authors do not address how sexual identity may shape the reporting of this data: how many of these girls might have been attracted to other girls as opposed to boys?, what might be their comfort level in reporting it?, was the survey written to elicit this type of data? While data about sexual identity may not have been collected at that time, we wonder why the authors have not considered these questions and interpretations in the writing of this book.

In the concluding sections of this chapter, Belsky et al. take up the question of how to mitigate the effects of childhood adversity in adolescent girls. They write,

it didn't take a lot of insight to suspect that boys—perhaps especially older, “bad” boys—played a big role in leading early-maturing girls into temptation. Consider the sort of boy who would be attracted to an early-maturing girl, whose figure is voluptuous but who is still cognitively and emotionally a child. (Belsky et al., 2020, p. 147)

These assumptions and this line of thinking lead them to compare data from girls who attended single-sex schools with those who attended coed schools. The latter group engaged in more delinquent behavior which has a significant link to early sexual activity (see, Jessor & Jessor, 1977, cited in Belsky, et. al, 2020). The authors suggest that single-sex schools are one way to mitigate the effects of early adversity on adolescent girls. While their recommendation may be pragmatic, it denies agency to girls who are made to appear as hapless victims of their developing bodies and who are mindlessly stimulated by older boys who can provide “new adultlike ways of behaving” (Belsky et al., 2020, p. 149). The recommendation also conveys an acceptance of “the ways things are,” as opposed to what they should and can be, i.e., designing co-educational environments where sexism and gender oppression are tackled head on. In fact, the authors allude to the “uncertain status of the adolescent in our society” (Belsky et al., 2020, p. 149). Given the data, we wonder why the authors did not consider the possibility of designing environments where teens are engaged in learning that has value for them and their communities, where teens are valued for who they are as opposed to being valued for their future potential as adults.

Reflecting on the entirety of the book, one of the students in our doctoral program found it riveting, but experienced “whiplash” moving from compelling findings to the limitations of the findings. We echo his question: “What is useful from this book?” The findings are limited in terms of drawing a straight line from origins to adulthood while offering very little in terms of individual intervention. We suggest that the findings are more valuable when considered within a sociocultural context (see Vygotsky, 1978 and Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

Most chapters in this book highlight the probable impact of contextual factors such as poverty, under-resourced schools, and societal views of children and adolescence in effecting an impact on various sets of phenotypes. The findings provide abundant evidence that contexts matter to human development; they suggest the potential of development within optimal contexts where human beings would flourish, not just survive. For example, studying how the diversity of parents (e.g., gender, culture, race and ethnicity, sexual identity, number) nurture their children when in non-impooverished contexts (an optimal environment), would provide us a diversity of child rearing frameworks to understand child development instead of using a definition of high-quality care as defined by one hegemonic cultural group. In 2021, as part of the American Rescue Plan,

Congress revamped the child tax credit and sent 15 billion dollars to 35 million families. This had an immediate impact of reducing the child poverty rate by 30%. If the tax plan is continued, this is a data pantry in the making for investigating the longitudinal impact of a benefit that improves a suboptimal context.

To this end, Nussbaum (2011) and Sen's (1999) capability framework is invaluable. Following the logic of the capability framework, we suggest that children's competence and capacity to exercise choice and agency needs to be put at the forefront of interpreting the findings. This requires a rethinking of the traditional stance of the field of child development, one which has always thought of children as on their way to becoming adults (rather than wholly formed beings at every moment in time), where the end goal of child development is to evaluate children in accordance with the "successful" adults they may become (prospective) or they do become (retrospective). Peleg elegantly elaborates, "it is not children's ability to choose that is debated, but rather the space that society, adults and the law gives children in order to make a choice, and the tolerance for what adults consider to be a mistake" (Peleg, 2013, p. 354). It is within this model that values and beliefs about "success" and "development" default to the hegemonic cultural group, a default that is evident in this book and that remains unquestioned by the authors.

In this model of human development (Nussbaum, 2011; Peleg, 2013; Sen, 1999) children are human beings, and children are regarded as having human rights, meaning they have agency and the right to participate and the right to have their opinions heard. Of course, children will need support as they exercise agency, make choices and express their views, but ultimately seeing the child as a human being leads to a radically different approach to child development. In this radically different framework, the findings in this book are open to fresh analyses and interpretations and the field of child development is open for rich and complex research that aims at supporting children in reaching their potential rather than merely building a theory of universal child development.

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