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Between A Flax And A Mangrove: Theories Of Human Development For Aotearoa

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Abstract

This paper proposes some theoretical principles for the study of human development arising from writing the text *Human Development in Aotearoa*. New perspectives emerging within Maoridom provide challenges to traditional euro-western approaches found in international textbooks that cannot be ignored. Similarly, the trend towards acknowledgement of culture and context must be reflected in a more interdisciplinary approach, blending ideas from developmental psychology with sociological theory and demographic data, among others. We argue that a social constructionist approach to lifespan development is helpful in maintaining the multiple understandings from Maori, euro-western and Pasifika approaches. Fruitful intersections between these local perspectives, such as the centrality of care and the emphasis on connection in contrast to individual needs provide the basis for an inclusive vision that is both respectful of the diversity of cultural understandings and grounded in the socio-political structures that define contemporary life in Aotearoa. These contingent and evolving views (and associated botanical metaphors) provoke a rethink of the notion of development, as well as challenging us to revisit the goals of educational practice in Aotearoa. They also pose some questions for the traditional theories that dominate the discipline internationally.

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Students in New Zealand and Australia seldom see their own cultures reflected in university textbooks. Instead, students pay considerable money for technically sophisticated textbooks from large US (and, to a much lesser extent, UK) publishers. These textbooks use mostly US case material and literature, though in recent years there has been an encouraging trend towards more "Australian and New Zealand" versions of US textbooks. For some years New Zealand students of human development clamoured for textbooks in which they could see reflections of their own lives. This was one impetus for our involvement in writing *Human Development in Aotearoa* (Bird & Drewery, 2000; Drewery & Bird, 2004). In our attempt to create a textbook of human development that would be relevant for and speak to a New Zealand audience, we faced critical issues that made us deeply question the field of human development, and its relevance for Aotearoa.

The Changing Debates in Developmental Theorising

Like most human development texts, we focused on the usual suspects, the theorists Freud, Erikson, Piaget, Vygotsky and Bronfenbrenner. Freud's theory, popular in the 1950s and 1960s, was supplanted by moves towards life-span perspectives, initially from the work of Erik Erikson, who expanded Freud's stages of childhood into adolescence and adulthood. Later lifespan work at the Max Planck Institute showed influences from social psychology and sociology (e.g. see Baltes, 1987).In the 1980s there was considerable debate about the usefulness of hierarchical structures in developmental theories, so that the end of this period saw a turn away from 'stage theories'. Piagetian theory, which had been quite dominant in the 1970s and 1980s, was gradually replaced in popularity by Vygotskian perspectives. However Vygotsky's theory was not contained in a coherent written opus, and neo-Vygotskian research in this tradition tended to cover a range of issues and perspectives (e.g. Rogoff & Wertsch, 1984).

The latest *Handbook of Child Psychology* (Lerner, 1998) gives an interesting portrait of the zeitgeist in the field of developmental theory internationally. There has been a major shift towards considering development in terms of intersecting systems. This work has a genealogy that goes back to Bronfenbrenner and his students. The initial rather vague references to systems have recently developed a much stronger paradigm, linked with systems work in a variety of disciplines. Some theorists advocate for an integrated "developmental science" that allows multi-method and multi-disciplinary approaches that combine neurocognition, genetics and embryology with larger social psychological issues in the wider context of sociology, history and anthropology (e.g. Carolina Consortium on Human Development, 1996).

We confess to some concern about the apparent emerging dominance of so-called systems approaches. The metaphor of a system has its origins in engineering - though biologists have gone beyond the original mechanistic approaches. What is called systems theory can now be found in a variety of incarnations, including closed, open and forms of 'in-between' systems. While the idea of a 'system' has a certain attraction, it is only too easy to draw 'models', show diagrams, and thus assert the relatedness of different, arbitrarily defined aspects of a 'system' to one another. While few social scientists practising today would deny the interrelatedness of multiple factors in development, the available systemic models tend to have limited explanatory or predictive value. Nevertheless, the current popularity of ideas that started with Bronfenbrenner cannot be denied. However we continue to feel some concern that the way these ideas are used in New Zealand glosses over the complex systems assumptions referred to above.

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In seeking a theoretical framework that might speak to New Zealand audiences more clearly than some traditional approaches we started with some of the age-old questions. A widely accepted theoretical principle has been that development is more than growth of body or experience. Werner and Kaplan (1956, p. 866) proposed the orthogenetic principle that development "proceeds from a state of relative lack of differentiation to a state of increasing differentiation and hierarchic integration". In other words, the infant's global skills and understanding become more specialised over time through processes that have a stage-like ordering. This principle has led to continuing questions that have been framed in theoretical debates. We chose to include these more as questions based around proposed dualisms, such as the extent to which any aspect of development is best described as global or differentiated; as a stable trait or more temporary state; as a continuous flow over time or discontinuous, with abrupt improvements; as mainly due to individual or social factors; or as based on universal norms or with cultural specificity. To the list of expected dualisms we added a question raised by numerous cultural groups about developmental theory as reflecting mainly 'rational' rather than spiritual questions.

In the 1990s there have been critiques that provide an opposing voice to the dominant systems theory perspectives (e.g. Burman, 1994; Morss, 1990, 1996). British authors Allison James and Alan Prout (1990) helped launch the new field of the sociology of childhood. John Morss (1990) raised questions about the continuing influence of Darwin's views, suggesting that developmental psychology retains more than a historical relationship with eugenics. Modernism is indicated by the focus in developmental theories on forward progress over time in the linear path of the individual from immaturity to maturity to decline. This is contrasted with postmodern perspectives that emphasise a multiplicity of possible paths for an individual life-course. It is interesting that the *Handbook* (Lerner, 1998) made almost no reference to these critical debates in development. Though the writers represent a host of nationalities, the reviewed research is predominantly from the US. The theoretical universe created by this influential handbook omits some of what we consider to be the most important theoretical work of the past two decades. In contrast, the August 2002 issue of the journal *Human Development*, edited by Barbara Rogoff, put cultural questions at the centre of developmental enquiry. Our own perspective fits more comfortably with the latter view, which includes indigenous writers and voices from less affluent countries, across a range of spiritual/religious traditions.

Indigenous views

In Aotearoa New Zealand there are longstanding indigenous views of childhood, family life and changes in the life course. New Zealand is unusual in having a large, politically strong indigenous population. Since the 1980s more writers have discussed issues of development from a distinctly Maori worldview (eg A. Durie, 1997; M. Durie, 1997; Macfarlane, 2004; Penetito, 2000; Pere, 1997; Tangaere, 1997). Such writers have had a strong effect on our teaching and writing about human development in Aotearoa, and caused us to question 'received' developmental knowledge. A significant influence on knowledge in education and psychology comes from the focus on a holistic framework that questions the parsing of developmental issues into domains such as perceptual/ cognitive, emotional/ affective or physiological and behavioural. A Maori worldview puts the interconnections between these different aspects into the centre of our enquiry. For those of us who are interested in giving an account of developmental theory, then, the focus falls on the kind of account that will enable such connections to remain central. The recent formalisation of the early childhood

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national curriculum on Maori principles known as Te Whaariki (literally, reference to a mat made of interwoven flax fronds) gave us the metaphor we sought to demonstrate the interweaving of some euro-western perspectives on development with those identified by Maori.

Maintaining integrity in indigenous cultural terms was an important principle of our writing. At the same time we needed to acknowledge the unique cultural diversity of Aotearoa, with increasing percentages of our population representing various Pasifika, Chinese and Indian ethnicities. To do this we used some strategies of a feminist poststructural position, maintaining a reflexive stance and making explicit both the dominant and marginal voices in a text, allowing multiplicities of voices to interrupt the former. To this end we included small boxed segments from a variety of authors in both editions, including Maori, Samoan, Tongan, and Tahitian cultural voices, as well as writers taking gay and disability perspectives.

We were explicit from the beginning about the need to write a text that is very consciously located in Aotearoa New Zealand. Although most commentators would agree that in industrialised societies around the world there is a convergence in the pattern of the life course, we have found over the years that not only do our students believe that the lifespan experience in other countries is not the same as it is in this one, they are actively resistant to the images and ways of speaking that pervade the large North American texts which we have previously used. Just as our readership is locally situated, so it is with our authorship. To suggest that the standing point of a developmental theorist in New Zealand is different from that of a theorist in, say, the United States, is crucial to the positioning of this book. We do not think that there is a universal body of knowledge about human development that is necessarily applicable to all people, so we are not intent upon either developing a universally generalisable theory, or offering 'the truth' about lifespan development. This is a major departure from the kind of scientific approach that typifies many developmental textbooks.

What's in a Metaphor?

The title of this paper refers to our search for an appropriate metaphor for human development. Discussion about metaphor might seem to be more relevant as a description of a mnemonic device to enable students to learn certain principles; in writing the textbook we were influenced by the need for such literary strategies. However the use of metaphor can go much deeper in pointing to layers of surplus meaning that expand theoretical semantics. Laurel Richardson refers to metaphor in qualitative research as "a literary device, the backbone of social science writing" (Richardson, 2000, p. 926; see also Janesick, 2000). Richardson paid tribute to Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) view that metaphoric language holds clues to the hidden subtexts in theoretical writing. In this sense the metaphor can act as a kind of hermeneutic, an explanatory device. Metaphoric language is also an important feature of te reo Maori and Pacific languages.

The human development theories referenced in most textbooks rely heavily on metaphor. The theorists themselves were perhaps mindful of the importance of metaphor in educating readers about their views, since most theorists were also educators. At the same time metaphors have become evocative in popular cultural understandings of development, including Freud's hydraulic engine, Piaget and Vygotsky's images of buds and leaves, Erikson's strands of rope and Bronfenbrenner's nested Russian dolls. An appropriate metaphor for human development in Aotearoa requires both cultural relevance and

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inclusiveness across our diversity. This was made more urgent with the request by several reviewers of the first text that theoretical coverage be expanded.

Our postgraduate students in human development were muses in our search for a metaphor. In classes with postgraduate students, one of us (WD) used the humble bowl of spaghetti as a metaphor for the complexities of human development. In contrast to the tidy images of buds and leaves or entwined strands, the different paths of wriggly, slippery pasta provide a more apt analogue of the multiplicity of paths through life, their different lengths and their illusive 'unity'. The metaphor emphasises the intertwining of many different aspects of development, which are both separate and yet difficult to divide easily into individual factors. The use of a food metaphor, however, registered some doubts, given that food is noa (not sacred) in Maori tikanga. An organic equivalent of the bowl of spaghetti was sought, which led another of us (LB) to a two-month digression into study of the mangrove forest's tangled roots, its bidirectional hybridity (at the liminal edge of the land and capable of existing in both fresh and salt water) and the cage-like shelter of its aerial roots (a nursery for infant fish and birds) all seemed to offer a rich, polymorphous metaphor for the complexities of human development. Unfortunately the metaphor received a lukewarm response from Victoria University human development postgraduates in 2002, when it was presented in a seminar. The mangrove was seen as "too Auckland", unfamiliar to many South Islanders and too pan-Pacific to be fully identified with New Zealand. We were pointed in another direction by a whole host of clues, from our students' work, to the plants outside our windows, to woven articles around us: towards the harakeke or New Zealand flax. Te harakeke is ubiquitous in Aotearoa and also features in many crucial whakatauki (Maori proverbs) that are relevant for human development. There are tangled leaves, a central core that is traditionally preserved, outer leaves that may be used for the weaving of mats, clothing and many other items. As mentioned above, the metaphor of the whaariki, or flax mat, has become central in both education and development. Te harakeke continues to amaze us with its open-endedness and continually emerging possibilities.

Positioning the writing

As an introductory text, the book was required both to cover the major theories of development and to offer a survey of current developmental research through the lifespan. Rather than take a straight expository voice, we chose to contextualise the theories, and to invite the reader to consider different, opposing or contrasting viewpoints throughout. In particular we set out to invite challenge to normalising assumptions, particularly but not only when we found these to be contrary to an inclusive stance. This commitment reached into our collaborative writing processes: we found that each of us had sensitivities to taken for granted assumptions that were less salient for the other, and so as a team we were more able to discover and deconstruct our own blind spots – and to write these into the text. Whilst we would certainly be pleased if readers from certain social groups claimed (as some have done) that the writing has empowered them, empowerment was not a central goal for our writing. On the contrary: we believe that actually seeing one's own assumptions as having potentially normalising consequences that may contribute to the oppression of others is in itself a self-reflective, eye-opening experience. If the writing is able to do this, we will be glad that some of our central educational goals have been met.

We did not write this text from a critical perspective simply to raise questions about assumptions. One task for developmentalists today is to sift through the traditional knowledge about 'universal' patterns of change through life in order to examine what this

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knowledge tells us about the possibilities for enhancing (or disrupting) the journeys of people's lives. In this book we invited our readers to think about whether some commonly accepted developmental pathways are necessarily the best ways for all people. From this 'critical' perspective, the study of human development is not neutral. Questions must be asked about who we are, both as individuals and as citizens or members of our society, and who we want to become. As we are seeing quite vividly with the ageing of our population, such considerations may change considerably over the lifespan, both as a result of physiological ageing, and because of social developments. Commitment to a theory that can encompass a culturally diverse society is difficult enough: in addition to such commitments, there are changing global and social conditions, and the constant presence of economic considerations in our personal and political lives.

An old charge that has been levelled at 'postmodern' writers has been the apparently spineless nihilism of a relativist view in which there is no clear path through all the multiplicities. We take the view that developmental theories are never neutral. Throughout its history the field of human development has been founded on a clear (but often unstated) assumption that the purpose of studying development is to improve conditions for people of all ages and to identify the optimal forms of functioning. Rather than reaching for a universalisable, generalisable and objective account of developmental theory, we take the position that the study of human development is quite clearly committed to improving conditions for individuals and families. At the same time we acknowledge that development may embrace both positive (optimal) as well as negative (harmful) processes and outcomes. However this commitment should not be mistaken as a claim to know the 'true' or right way: on the contrary, the claim we are making is that even while we are wanting to do 'the right thing', rightness, truth and even knowledge itself are transitory achievements, subject to the shifts of history, geography, politics and cultures. Thus we take up a political stance which at the same time we acknowledge may be temporary and subject to change. This limited and temporary essentialism applies equally to our acceptance of the diversity of cultures, their historical and social grounding and their mutability over time. However, it does require an acceptance that our conclusions are always open to ongoing engagement with the diverse perspectives of others. Any account of development is therefore partial, and it must include an account of its purposes or endpoints: the robustness of the account can be tested by how it performs in the face of the purposes of diverse others. On this (meta-) account of development as a dialogical, never-ending process, we are never likely to 'get it right' in a full and final sense. The metaphor for development then becomes more like the ebb and flow of a conversation in which everyone has speaking rights. The positions we come to are always subject to further discussion and potential revision.

Multiple perspectives

Thus, at the risk of laying ourselves open to the accusation of wanting our cake and eating it too, we see human development as a multi-disciplinary study whose overall intentions are neither transparently obvious nor objectively determined. Indeed, we want to suggest that the notion of care is central to our field. Yet clearly, what counts as care for one person, group or culture may not seem so for another. We believe it is crucial that the field of human development engage with the issues raised by such considerations. The alternative is to accept a god-like claim about the rightness of our knowledge and our right therefore to impose it on others. Rejecting this traditional "scientific" position means that we must constantly give accounts not only of how we think a particular development occurs, making

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explicit our own position; we must also take into account the ways in which different people interpret their actions in their own terms.

One of the 'homes' for our approach is within the developing philosophy of social constructionism, which, among other things, brings a focus on processes of meaning making (Burr, 2003). Here we posit that Constructionism is both a theory about how knowledge is developed, that is, an epistemology, and a theory about how language works to frame human action. Constructionism presumes that humans are active participants in creating the cultural, social and personal meanings within which lives are played out. Emphasis on processes of meaning production reflects our position that we are as interested in understanding the contributions of the actors involved, as we are in finding, reaching or objectively describing stable states. Language in this approach is the frame within which we constitute ourselves. Thus, the meanings available to us in the social contexts of our lives have "shaping effects" (White, 2001) – they provide both the limits and the possibilities for the kinds of actions human beings can consider, and thus for the persons we might become (Davies, 1990). This approach can be applied equally to the development of theory and to the development of individuals, families and other social groups.

Like human beings, developmental theories change too, so that what we see as explanations for the linkages in developmental processes in one era may not be the same in another time or place. In respect of developmental theories, we have taken care to give (albeit briefly) a historical, geographical and cultural context for each of the major theorists presented in the book. The political context for the development of, for example, Piaget's genetic epistemology is very different from the political context of Vygotsky's work: such contrasts demonstrate the limitations of ways in which these two theories are often compared and evaluated. An implication of Constructionism is that we cannot take individuals as the primary unit of motivation: instead we accept that all meaning is the product of social relationships. Thus particular forms of development must be seen as the products of particular social contexts. The developmentalist can then ask of any development, whether in an individual or in a social group such as a family, what are the features of meaning that have come together to produce these particular kinds of actions or developmental outcomes? One of the ways in which this finds expression in our text is that we have introduced each section by identifying what we see as the dominating ways of thinking – the discourses - around concepts such as children, youth, adult, mid-life and ageing in Aotearoa New Zealand. Of course, these ways of thinking are heavily influenced by research and theory from North America and the United Kingdom. Where possible we have tried to point out how indigenous meanings, including both traditional Maori concepts and local ways of speaking and thinking, contrast with or are influenced by these euro-western ideas. In this way we have offered the beginnings of an analysis of the dominating discourses influencing developmental thinking in our own country at this time, and from our perspectives.

The process of producing the book itself exemplifies both multiple viewpoints and the kind of tolerance of contradiction that is necessary to a constructionist approach. It was always our intention to write collaboratively; however we cannot guarantee that we both agree on every aspect of what we have written. Our disagreements about such issues proved enormously rewarding in the development of the text. The main requirement for this collaboration proved to be our willingness to engage on the basis of the common philosophy outlined above: respect for the possibility of multiple perspectives and a determination to offer each other equal rights to speak. In this sense the book is a co-construction, and more

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than the sum of us. At the same time, it offers multiple perspectives without a need to take up a consistent stance on particular issues.

Finally

The field of human development implies assumptions about *optimal development*. One approach is to consider ways in which each individual can reach their optimal potential in terms of skills, capacities and self-expression. Another way of thinking about this is to suggest that studying human development helps people to understand the kinds of *care* that is given by others and benefits people of different ages as they move through the challenges of their lives. Making care, including care of one's self, central to human development emphasises the importance of interdependent relationships among people and our reliance on one another in creating a good life. Consistent with the reflexivity of a poststructural feminist standpoint, we invite consideration of our desires to shape the paths of others around us, whether they are our children, our students, our friends or other people for whom we provide support and care. The study of human development is crucial to these considerations. In this sense it is a study that affects all of us. The hegemonic nature of textbooks on the subject has not escaped us. We hope it is clear that it is a task that we have not taken lightly.

Finally, our framework encompasses a commitment to practical action. The collaborative process of working with a variety of students, colleagues and wider community members in this project is an integral part of development that needs to find its place in the articulation of theory.

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