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Book review

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Book review

Peter Stanley

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Santrock, J. W. (2022). *Essentials of life-span development*. (7th ed.).

McGraw Hill, 2022, 7th ed., 460 pp., \$138.16 (paperback)

ISBN 978-1-265-35984-3

Over a decade ago I reviewed the first edition of this textbook for a higher education journal (Stanley, 2010), and my primary justification for writing a review then was that introductory courses in human development, which are common to qualifications in teaching, early childhood education, nursing, and social work attract large numbers of students. A further explanation for the original review was that the author, John Santrock, had attempted something new, which was to write a slim-downed human development textbook that could be studied in a single semester. At the time of writing the 2010 review, I was teaching human development, and what I wrote was an evaluation of the text that highlighted the positive responses that students made to it. I have now been retired from academic life for 12 years, Santrock's *Essentials of Life-span Development* is currently in its seventh edition, and my motivations for reading and reviewing the text have altered. More than anything, I have wanted to know how this book, with which I was once very involved, has changed. There has also been another purpose, however, and that has been to see how the life changes that I have experienced in retirement are illuminated by reading the updated version of this human development textbook.

Essentials of Life-span Development, 2022, remains true to its original 2008 intention, which was to provide the core concepts of life-span development with a strong research base and with an emphasis on the applications of the discipline. The present-day book seems remarkably familiar in its layout and sub-titles, but the content revisions across the successive editions have been colossal. For instance, the edition which is reviewed here has over 1,500 new research reports from 2018–2021 alone. Topics that Santrock (2022) now addresses across the life span are brain development and executive function, the benefits of sleep and exercise, and the negative consequences of excessive screen time. The Biological Beginnings chapter has been given a substantial makeover while Early Adulthood has had a shift in direction. New to the biology discussion are gene x environment interactions, prenatal development of the brain, fetal MRI and sex determination, and increasing concerns about antenatal exposure of offspring to e-cigarettes, synthetic opioids, and marijuana. Additional to the Early Adulthood chapter are achievement-related topics, such as mindset, motivation, goal setting, planning, self-monitoring, and grit. The inclusion of these fresh subjects presumably relates to the fact that people in their 20s and 30s



are coping with a changed work and financial landscape and individual journeys have become more variable.

It is very interesting to read the new critiques of Piaget and Kohlberg in Santrock (2022). These theorists were the mainstays of my undergraduate initiation into human development studies and over the past 50 years there have been many attempts to chip away at what they said. For Piaget, a common theme of the ongoing criticisms is that he underestimated the cognitive abilities of young children. At this time, commentators are divided amongst those who contend that infants come “prewired” to make sense of their world and those who see the extent of social experience as critical to early development. Meanwhile, Kohlberg’s work is now challenged by the domain theory of moral development, and particularly by social conventional reasoning, which is put forward as separate from higher moral reasoning. Kohlberg, by contrast, viewed social conventions as, effectively, “a developmental stop-over on the road to higher moral sophistication” (p. 243). It is unfortunate that Santrock has deleted the six sub stages of Piaget’s sensorimotor stage from the new edition. Equally, it is a shame that only the levels (but not the stages) of Kohlberg’s hierarchy of moral development have been retained from the first edition. These sets of discriminations underlined the genius of these theorists as observers and interpreters of developmental processes and they are important for a full understanding of what they proposed.

At the conclusion of both the first and seventh editions, John Santrock says that he hopes that his books have “been a window to the life span of the human species and a window to your own personal journey in life” (2008, p. 433; 2022, p. 459). As a university teacher of human development, I embraced a philosophy of personalisation, which mostly meant relating theory and research to past lived experiences (Stanley, Fraser, & Spiller, 2011). Of course, human development is eminently suited to such an approach and everyone who participates in the teaching and learning experience is a potential “storehouse” of relevant contributions. Since leaving academia, the lesson that developmental processes are operating right up to the moment of our deaths has been reaffirmed for me. And subsequent to my retirement, I have had a succession of significant life events (including grandparenting, the loss of close relatives, and the experience of retirement itself), which I would now deal with quite differently as a teacher. Moreover, if I was teaching a first-year human development course now I would readily choose the new *Essentials of Life-span Development* as the principal text. Apart from my associations with the book, the justifications for this selection are manifold, such as its strong empirical base, its topicality, currency, and manageability; the availability of online student support packages, and its relative lack of ideological preoccupations.

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