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Human development

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Abstract

This article draws attention to commonalities in the use of the term development in relation to global development as practised by the United Nations Development Programme, and human development as taught in foundation courses for teacher education, nursing, and other social sciences. It argues, following Sen (2009), that the common direction and purpose of these two development projects is towards social justice. Theories of lifespan development affect the lives of persons both through national policy and self-management. Human development cannot and ought not to be sustained as a project for spreading euro-western values. Using the example of youth unemployment, it is argued that popular theories of career development, based on the twentieth century contexts of their authors, promote outdated assumptions, which create real personal turmoil for young adults who are trying to fit themselves into this changing world. The focus of the study of human development is optimal directions; thus for individuals, as for countries, development is both a global and a moral project. Placing emphasis on the global context of human development has far-reaching implications for scholars of lifespan development. These considerations also foreshadow the need to examine the role of lifespan developmental theory in Education, which is an acknowledged tool of global development.

Keywords

Lifespan development, global development, youth unemployment, career development, United Nations Development Programme.

Introduction

Human development seems to me to be a bigger idea than lifespan development. People in the general population are more likely to think about the kind of work done by agencies such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) when they hear the term “human development” than about the psychologised academic study of the lifespan of individuals in families and societies, which is the focus of this special edition. Yet the continuing use of the term “human development” for foundation



courses in Education, Nursing and Social Science suggests similarities between development through the lifespan and the more global concept. So, how should educators think about human development—and does it matter? I think it does, not because this is a conceptual tangle that needs to be sorted out, but because Education is one of the vehicles through which development, either in individuals, families, and communities, or in countries and cultures, is accomplished. In this sense I want to make a bold statement: Education is about learning, yes, but it is first and foremost about justice. Human growth and development might be about how children and adolescents change with age, but underlying the study is the notion that understanding change with age can help us to foster *optimal* development. In other words, there is an underlying moral aspect to our subject, particularly as it is placed in teacher education.

Development is also, of course, a focus of many aspects of New Zealand public policy, though rarely is it mentioned in national policy as a tool of *development*. I suspect that many people, both policy makers and in the general population, would think that progress in national and global development is primarily an economic measure. I do not accept this interpretation. Even economic development has to be moderated by considerations of justice. A common meaning of “development” is that it implies something is improving—it is progressing, going somewhere. We require student teachers to learn human development so that they will be able to recognise the learning needs of students as they change over time. Likewise, national policy makers make assumptions about development at different ages for the nation’s citizens, and in this sense they too make assumptions about optimal lifespan development. The main argument of this paper is that both lifespan human development and national/global development are underpinned by a similar moral imperative. Thus, I propose that our objective in teaching lifespan development, particularly the project of raising and educating future citizens, is increasingly a global project. These two apparently different endeavours—the academic study and the global development project—are converging, and we need to take heed. We cannot pretend any more that the lives of individual persons, or even individual nations, are isolated from the global context. And scholarly practice is implicated, whether we like it or not. I will use the example of youth unemployment to illustrate.

Common aims

But first, let me describe some recent shifts in the conceptualisation of human development by the United Nations. Human development is an underlying project of the United Nations (UN), a global organisation whose political brief includes “maintaining international peace and security, developing friendly relations among nations, and promoting social progress, better living standards, and human rights” (United Nations, 2011). Each year, the UNDP produces the Human Development Index (HDI), which may be viewed as a measure of developmental progress by nation states. The index ranks countries on various indicators, including Health, Education and Living Standards, and also on the Environment (for example the ecological footprint of a country) and Social Structure (particularly safety and security, and freedom from isolation).

In this global context, the social projects of Health and Education are major drivers of development: countries that scored high in the HDI 2010 did so through Health and Education, not economics. This underlines a shift in emphasis. The Human

Development Report 2010 was titled *The Real Wealth of Nations: Pathways to Human Development* (UNDP, 2010). Referring back to a statement made in 1990, “People are the real wealth of a nation”, which heralded “a new approach to thinking about development,” the Summary of the 2010 report underlines the value it places on people and their well-being. It begins thus:

That the objective of development should be to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives may appear self-evident today. But that has not always been the case. A central objective of the Report for the past 20 years has been to emphasize that development is primarily and fundamentally about people.

This year’s Report celebrates the contributions of the human development approach, which is as relevant as ever to making sense of our changing world and finding ways to improve people’s well-being. Indeed, human development is an evolving idea—not a fixed, static set of precepts—and as the world changes, analytical tools and concepts evolve. So this Report is also about how the human development approach can adjust to meet the challenges of the new millennium.

The past 20 years have seen substantial progress in many aspects of human development. Most people today are healthier, live longer, are more educated and have more access to goods and services. Even in countries facing adverse economic conditions, people’s health and education have greatly improved. And there has been progress not only in improving health and education and raising income, but also in expanding people’s power to select leaders, influence public decisions and share knowledge.

Yet not all sides of the story are positive. These years have also seen increasing inequality—both within and across countries—as well as production and consumption patterns that have increasingly been revealed as unsustainable. Progress has varied, and people in some regions—such as Southern Africa and the former Soviet Union—have experienced periods of regress, especially in health. New vulnerabilities require innovative public policies to confront risk and inequalities while harnessing dynamic market forces for the benefit of all. (UNDP, 2010)

Clearly there is a strong convergence of goals between the global and the academic human development projects. Where the Development Programme is intent on what makes countries better places to live in, the multidisciplinary science is interested in thinking about what enables people to live long, healthy and creative lives. As with any score that reports global measures, the HDI suggests generalisations about a population, but does not tell us about the lives of individuals, even though the categories Health, Education, and Social Structure, for example, are inevitably involved in the daily lives of individuals. Thus, the index offers scholars of human development a valuable source of discussion about what produces well-being. The social science of human development cannot afford to ignore the differential impacts of environments and social structures on personal well-being—just as, I contend, the UNDP cannot afford to ignore the experiences of individuals in their environments.

Neither, I suggest, can the academy ignore the political aspects of the work of the UNDP. If it is true that inequality is increasing, and with it multidimensional poverty, we need to be concerned. From a social justice perspective, though, in this global context, there is something wrong with a focus on self-actualisation, for example, as a pinnacle of development (Maslow, 1968). Since few developmental trajectories follow the perfect pathway, focus only on the “best” outcomes would encourage us to see developmental deficit and negative outcomes everywhere. We would find ourselves too frequently lamenting what cannot be rather than what can. Focus on the increasing gaps between rich and poor, both within and between countries, reflects a concern with social justice (rather than personal deficit) that resonates well for many scholars of the academic subject. However I am not aware of any history of interest in the Human Development Indexes in the social science of human development.

Approaches to development

Partly, this non-connection may be related to a particular view of science, and what counts as knowledge about development. Scientific knowledge is often defined as knowledge that is objectively derived, universally true and (therefore) unchanging. The experience of individuals is quite the reverse. The study of individual meanings counts as scientific only if it can be generalised, and the study repeated with similar results. This is of course difficult to do. Yet for many of us who study human development, it is the stories of change in individuals, families and small groups that make the subject so attractive. The power of scientific knowledge is therefore something of a challenge. We cannot argue that the stories of individuals are irrelevant; neither can we use them to prove any grand scientific theory. In spite of this epistemological problem, for many students of lifespan development, the generalised patterns of change over the lifespan serve as a backdrop for understanding the progress of lives rather than revealing truths about them. This notion of progress is one of the aspects that make the study of the lifespan developmental. And problematically, it encourages the idea that there exist distinctive goals for personal as well as human development. But like the UNDP, I think even personal development is “an evolving idea” rather than a set of static concepts. This is not the way many euro-western texts encourage us to think about it, however.

There are many deliciously interesting theories about what enables the development of individuals from infancy to adulthood. Over the last century there have been constant debates about the relative influence of “nature” or “nurture” in producing outcomes for individual lives. Historically, theorists such as Sigmund Freud have placed strong emphasis on internal drives. Others as different as B. F. Skinner (1971) and John Bowlby (1951) have argued that aspects of a child’s upbringing can determine its adult personality and behaviour. Konrad Lorenz (1973) made a strong argument for ethology, the influence of underlying instincts in development from a very early age. Erik Erikson (1994) suggested that identity, for example, unfolds in relation to the quality of a person’s social environment. Jean Piaget (1972) argued that biology is a major underpinning of, and constraint on, human cognition. Physiological study of development in childhood has tended to focus on the interaction between what the child’s genotype enables and what its upbringing affords. Attempts to explain development through adulthood have also tended towards internalised explanations, for

example, the “social clock”, which suggests to the person when it is time to find a mate, time to marry, time to have children, and so on (Neugarten, 1979).

Most of these approaches involve the idea that physiology influences development through the lifespan. The idea of “critical periods” for development also depends on this essentially biological account. The apparent success of this approach is reflected in the recent popularity of evolutionary psychology. The scientific quest for certainty goes on, but it is unlikely that a lifespan developmental theory will ever reach the status of universal truth in the way biological science might do. None of these theories is concerned with the particular situations of individual persons. All of them are inherently distancing of the scientist from personal experience.

Although biological and psychological sciences have much to offer the study of human development, we also have to consider that how human beings make sense of our worlds affects what we wish and hope for. The moral agency of individuals is thus also implicated in what we are able to set our sights on. The discursive environment—ways of thinking about optimal personal development, for example—can also become a limiting or enabling factor, just like environmental conditions. How we teach human development in the academy contributes to the discursive conditions within which individuals, teachers, social workers, nurses, counsellors and policy makers think about what is possible for the ideal life.

Education was a notable driver of higher country ratings on the recent HDI. Demographic commentaries, including reports generated by the World Bank, have long acknowledged that higher educational levels of women account for higher health status (as demonstrated by, for example, lower overall and infant mortality rates), even in countries where the per capita income is relatively low (Caldwell, 1986; World Bank, 1993). In his book *Development as Freedom* (1999), the 1998 Economics Nobel Prize winner Amartya Sen argued that poverty is the deprivation of basic capabilities rather than simply low income. He has gone on to argue that development *is* social justice. According to Sen, justice is about self-determination or agency for individuals and communities (Sen, 2009). Wilkinson and Pickett (2009) argued that rates of depression, suicide and imprisonment, for example, are higher in countries where there are increasing inequities between the rich and the poor. Clearly these are complex relationships, which I do not have space to argue fully here. Suffice to say that agency and self-determination are familiar goals from an educator’s perspective, and that if poverty denies basic capabilities, educators need to be concerned about it.

Theories of change through adulthood

Theorists of change in adulthood have tended to focus on the preoccupations or tasks that typify stages or transitions through adult life (Erikson, 1950; Gould, 1975; Levinson, 1977, 1978). This approach could be seen as an anthropological study of patterns of social “development” through adulthood in a particular society. In effect, it records the lifespan trajectory of the successful middle-class male in the time and culture of the theorist—for most, the North America of the mid-twentieth century. Most theories implicitly suggest satisfactory outcomes at each point in the continuum of the lifespan. And most can also be accused of gender blindness: Erikson, for example, placed generativity in the middle years, when many adults, mostly women, are engaged in the work of caring for babies and children, and building a family, rather earlier; and Levinson focused on independence related to financial security and career development.

Thinking critically about these now dated but still influential theorists enables us to see how their ideas reflect the social norms of their time, and raises questions about the appropriateness of their essentially descriptive stage methodology for a more consciously global study of development.

For a range of reasons it has become difficult for young people to grow up in the terms these theorists name as indicative of maturity in New Zealand. Both here and around the world, life expectancy is increasing, and the demographic shape of the adult lifespan is already very different from the 1970s. A child born in 2011 in New Zealand can expect to live more than 80 years. At the same time, the number of older people currently aged over 80 years is increasing much faster than the number of children aged less than 15 years. Our population profile is changing to the extent that by the late 2020s, the proportion of children in the population is likely to be exceeded by the over 65s. People are already living longer, and proportionally fewer children are being born. In 2010 New Zealand, the marriage rate per 1000 unmarried persons continued to drop, and the age at first marriage to increase (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.). Most young adults living today can expect to live at least another 60 years after they reach the age of 20, and for many the period between 60 and their eventual death will be longer than the time it took for them to grow from infant to young adult.

To a large extent, the transition from child to adult is still *the* major rite of passage in a person's life. In euro-western developmental theory, this transition marks the development of the young child into an "independent" adult. Over the last 30 years, there has been an increasing literature arguing that the transition from youth to adult is becoming longer and less clearly delineated. Jeffrey Arnett, for example, has for some time postulated a new psychological phase between adolescence and adulthood, which he calls "emerging adulthood" (Arnett, 2004). According to Arnett, this new phase is characterised psychologically by identity exploration, instability, self-focus, and a sense of being in-between, unable to call oneself, unambiguously, an adult. Perhaps not surprisingly, there is also a growing literature that suggests that many young adults in euro-western countries are distressed by the fact that they feel unable to "grow up". Apter (2002) in the United Kingdom called this group "thresholders", and in the United States, Robbins and Wilner (2001) coined the term "the quarter-life crisis" to describe the difficulties faced by many 25-year-olds. For her programme dedicated to the topic, the celebrity television presenter Oprah Winfrey found numbers of young adults who were willing to attest to the fact that they are unable to "feel" like an adult. Numbers of self-help books have now emerged offering advice on how to navigate this period and to ameliorate its effects (e.g., Hassler, 2005). Most of these focus on the internal emotional state of those so afflicted.

Effects of changing social conditions

It is a well-known interpretation that adolescence as a phase in lifespan development is a product of the historical era when families could no longer live and work together—industrialisation required a different kind of workforce; and young people required a longer period of education. Arguably, we are seeing a transition of a similar kind in 2011, though I am certainly not arguing that it requires a similar theoretical or policy response. Youth unemployment is high in many developed countries. Many state governments are dealing with the ensuing lengthening periods of economic dependency by anticipating increased participation in tertiary education; some argue that the

problem of youth unemployment is due to lack of appropriate education and training. At the same time, in developed countries such as the United Kingdom and New Zealand, the cost of higher education is seen as contributing to the economic liability of the state, and attempts are being made to transfer the cost of their education increasingly to individual students. In New Zealand, this strategy often results in students graduating with high student loans, and there is some concern at the government level about the number of students who default on their repayments. These political factors are the background against which our youth are looking for their place in the adult world. Having a job means being an economic actor in our society. In such a society, unemployed people—especially, in this case, unemployed young people—are effectively excluded.

Added to this, but also not explicit, is the fact that over time, productivity in our country is achieved with the input, or labour, of fewer people. Classic texts such as *Future Shock* (Toffler, 1972) heralded people's reaction to the speed of this change, if not the nature of it, four decades ago. Now, in the second decade of the twenty-first century, here we are, in this future. Many jobs have been taken over by machines, from bank tellers, to type setters, to supermarket stock ordering. This situation has overtaken us all in the space of less than one, or at the most two, generations. It is arguable that in post-industrial countries we are not well prepared to meet the consequences of such changes. Still, the political environment continues to encourage young adults' expectations of, and responsibility for, economic growth. Our theory has become part of the problem, blinding us to alternatives.

Reviewing the fact that jobs that were once the baseline of a life career can come into and go out of existence within a generation, a New Zealand Department of Labour report (2008) noted that three major factors, the ageing population, continuing global trends in technology and changing skill requirements, add up to a situation in which it is difficult to anticipate the training and education needs of the future workforce. The accelerating pace of technological change and innovation, new products and new markets mean that the requirement is for new and differently skilled workers. The report argues that the evolving nature of work, including the developing range of employment arrangements, requires that workers need to upgrade their skills frequently, across their working life. In response to this assessment of workforce requirements, the report advises three things for young people: do the basics well (including ICT, literacy and numeracy), maintain communication skills, and develop flexibility—it will be required throughout life. It comments:

Yet to a large extent, current policy settings governing work, the workforce and the workplace assume a traditional employment relationship, characterised as “full-time jobs of indefinite duration at a facility owned or rented by the employer”. (Department of Labour, 2008, pp. 14–15)

Whilst this disjunction may be true of government policy in New Zealand, it is also arguable that lifespan developmental theory is similarly outdated. One of the ways in which we can notice the lack of preparedness for the new future of paid work is in the poverty of theory around development in adulthood. Nowhere is this impoverishment clearer than in theories of career development. John Holland's approach (1973, 1996) to career counselling is the basis of most publicly available career advice. This approach categorises types of work and types of personality, and suggests that persons with

different personality types will be satisfied by particular work careers, matched according to Holland's typology. Setting aside, for the moment, critique of the idea that personalities come in fixed types, the assumption is that personality types can be matched to jobs, and most jobs and people fit into these categories. If it is correct to argue that workforce requirements are more varied and less stable than previously may have been assumed, this typology is likely to be quickly outdated—or at least, it will require constant reframing as the types of jobs and their specific demands continue to flex and change. Thus, even at the simplest level, the general approach of matching personality type to job type is unlikely to be as helpful as might be expected for the young people who are trying to make sense of the brave new world they are meeting in the twenty-first century.

Whilst young people themselves are aware, at a personal level, of the changes referred to in the Department of Labour report, career and course planning advice that is based on a static typology runs counter to everything they are experiencing about the instability of paid work options in their own lives. It is not surprising, therefore, that many young people are uncertain how to move forward: what career to plan for, what tertiary courses to commit to, and what kind of adulthood they can expect (rather than wish for). And if financial independence, living independently, and (thus) taking moral responsibility for themselves are indeed markers of being an adult, of course many are finding it hard to work out how to think about their future. It seems to me that most young people do take moral responsibility for themselves, but moral maturity must be disengaged from the other traditional markers. When financial independence is difficult to attain, independent living is possible only with extreme difficulty—and poverty, even with a student living allowance (for which not all qualify, and which has to be repaid). Because financial independence is a marker of adult status in euro-western societies, it can be very difficult to feel like an adult when one is still reliant on the resources and good grace of one's parents; whereas in cultures where earning power is shared throughout the family group, regardless of age, generational interdependency may not be experienced as failure to mature. Perhaps some of us need to revise our expectations of heroic, individual, financial independence, and stop seeing it as the marker of successful growth and development. This is of course a very shocking idea.

Some implications

It brings me back to the relationship between lifespan development and global development. Increasingly, both global and local social and economic conditions affect what is possible in terms of optimal development for individuals. Conversely, it is possible that some culturally specific theoretical ideals of personal development may be fundamentally precluded by global socio-economic factors. Without a sense of contemporary global issues in development, lifespan developmental theory, grounded as it is in euro-western cultural norms, can become punitive in its effects, rather than showing a pathway to personal well-being. This happens when we hold out the theoretical goal as a moral imperative, thus implying deficit in persons whose opportunities are limited by conditions over which they have no control.

Nevertheless, I do expect developmental theory to throw light on pathways to well-being. This means that we who study the subject of human development need to be very conscious of changing social circumstances, and consider critically the impact of the location of theoretical perspectives on real people in time, place and culture. Human

development cannot and ought not to be sustained as a project for spreading euro-western values. Reading the daily news and other social media, it is much easier now to think that the fate of the young person in Aotearoa is related to the fate of young people in Europe, India, China and Japan—perhaps harder to see the links with Somalia where, at the time of writing, famine has been declared. Education clearly has a role to play in global development: and educators must cultivate an awareness of the needs of individual students within both local and global context. Justice demands that we teach human development, the subject, in ways that provide the basis for a realistic empathy between people around the globe. If development is about progress, human development is above all a moral project.

However much our science may yearn for universal truths, we are talking here about people's moral investment in their intergenerational lives. Therefore, our subject has to pay attention to individual experience; and we have to acknowledge that what applies in one context may not apply in others. And so we must hold lightly our theories about patterns of development through the lifespan, so that they do not become prescriptive by default. This stance renders the study of human development methodologically complex, and suggests that the field is in need of an extended discussion on the epistemological difficulties of working between and across disciplines, in theory and in practice.

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