



Human Development

A LIFE-SPAN PERSPECTIVE

Richard M. Lerner

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HUMAN DEVELOPMENT: A Life-Span Perspective

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Preface

For more than a decade the behavioral sciences have been involved in exciting changes in perspective. Instead of scientists working in relative disciplinary isolation, greater efforts at multidisciplinary integration have occurred. In addition, there has been a concern with the ecology of human behavior; with the role of the changing social context in individual development; with mutual influences between people and their world; and with the potential of humans to change across their entire lives. These changes in perspective may be summarized and synthesized by a view of human development that has been labeled the *life-span perspective*.

The objective of this text is to examine human development from conception to death within the context of this perspective. This text is intended primarily for beginning undergraduates in the behavioral sciences, particularly those in psychology and human development. However, the text should be accessible to students with little or no background in behavioral or social science since the presentation assumes no prior coursework in those areas.

Point of View

Texts often present information in an encyclopedic manner; that is, they set forth the “facts.” However, the facts available about any given topic are generally diverse and often conflicting. In our view, an understanding of a topic requires a framework within which information may be integrated. In this text, we will use the emerging life-span developmental perspective to integrate the theory and research related to human development. The life-span approach represents a conceptual orientation characterized by emphasis on:

1. ***The Description, Explanation, and Optimization of Behavior.*** The questions of what behaviors occur, why behaviors occur, and how to alter behaviors are considered equally important for understanding development.
2. ***Multidirectional Development.*** Processes of growth and decline occur at all points in the life cycle. Development, therefore, is not defined as just a continuous process of growth, and aging is not defined as a continuous process of decline; both constancy *and* change are emphasized.
3. ***The Individual in Context.*** Development is the result of interactions among multiple processes and events, including those related to age and to history. In order to understand development, we must look at the interaction between the individual and the contexts in which he or she lives (e.g., physical, familial, cultural, historical).

4. *Multiple Theories and Methods.* An adequate understanding of development cannot be obtained from any one theory or methodology, nor can it be obtained from a cataloging of empirical facts.

Organization

Individuals attempting to teach a course or write a text on human development immediately confront a difficult choice: Should the material be organized by focusing on developmental processes or by examining the various “stages” of the life span? This choice is a difficult one, since there are positive features to both strategies. For example, a focus on processes allows one to appreciate the changes over time in the individual’s biological, psychological, and social functioning. On the other hand, a focus on age stages allows one to understand the processes and life events which characterize particular portions of the human life cycle: infancy, childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle age, and old age.

In this text, we capitalize on the strengths of both approaches. We have adopted a “process-within-stage” approach. That is, within each of several succeeding portions of the life span—prenatal development, birth, infancy, childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and the aged years—we present the key developmental processes and contextual influences that, in their combination, make each period of life a special, unique one.

In our view, this organization follows logically from the life-span developmental perspective. The life-span perspective directs our attention to behavior-change processes and to the role that interactive contextual influences play in moderating development at each portion of the life cycle. Thus we first examine basic theoretical and empirical information related to these changes over the entire age range involved. We then turn to our processes-within-stages presentation. The book is thus organized as follows:

In Part 1—“Philosophical, Historical, Social Scientific, and Biological Bases” (Chapters 1, 2, and 3)—we describe the life-span developmental perspective and review its philosophical and historical bases and the research methods used to investigate development. In addition, we discuss the biological bases of human development across life. These chapters provide a framework within which the information on human development may be integrated and evaluated.

In Part 2—“Prenatal and Infant Development” (Chapters 4, 5, and 6)—we discuss the physical, cognitive, personality, and social processes of human development, as they interrelate with the social (e.g., familial) and historical features of the context, in these initial portions of the human life course.

Part 3—“Child and Adolescent Development” (Chapters 7 through 11)—continues with these emphases and pays particular attention to bidirectional influences between the developing person and his or her social world, as well as to the bases and implications of sex differences in development during these portions of the life cycle.

Finally, in Part 4—“Adulthood and Aging” (Chapters 12 through 15)—we examine changes in learning, memory, personality, and social functioning. We consider the integration of processes, person, and context within a life-course perspective by outlining a life-event and life-transition framework. In these chapters the transitions and events unique to young adulthood, middle age, and old age, and finally to death and dying—the final event in life—are discussed.

Special Features

We have included a number of special features that will make the book more interesting and helpful to the student.

Chapter Overviews. Each chapter begins with a brief statement about its focus, a listing of the first- and second-order headings, and a list of issues to consider when reading the chapter. These overviews should orient the student to the chapters.

Chapter Summaries. Each chapter ends with a summary of the main points of the chapter. These summaries should aid the student in reviewing the chapter.

Boxed Inserts. Throughout the text, we have highlighted certain material by placing it in boxed inserts. These inserts are designed to accomplish various ends. Some are designed to provide an in-depth look at topics introduced in the text or to illustrate different techniques for measuring development. Others are “asides” designed to provide case examples or to illustrate interesting new ideas or controversies in the field.

Glossary. A glossary of specialized terms that have been used in the text is provided at the end of the book.

References. An extensive reference list at the end of the text permits the instructor and student to follow up topics of interest.

Instructor’s Manual. A manual summarizing the main points of each chapter and including an extensive list of test questions, film suggestions, and other instructional aids is available to all instructors who adopt the text.

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David F. Hultsch

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