Theory Of Human Development Essay, Research Paper

Theory of Human Development

What makes people what they are? Why do poeple do what they do? Where does personality come from and how does it grow? These are some frequently asked questions when discussing the topic of personality. The latter of the questions is actually an answer in itself. Personality does originate from a specific point, and from then on it continues to grow and become exponentially more complex. This core point from which personality begins and the growth of personality will be discussed in the sections to follow, but first we must look at certain assumptions that are commonly made when developing a personality theory.

Assumptions

The first of these assumptions concerns whether one believes that the behaviors, any type of action, a person exhibits are produced by conscious choices and decisions, also known as free will, or “determined” by forces beyond one’s control. I believe in the free will explanation, but not the type of free will commonly imagined. Humans do ultimately have the power to choose their actions, however the extreme influence of other factors, such as heredity, environment, and learned behaviors, may make it seem like a person’s actions were predetermined. For example, if a starving people were put into positions where they could either eat a Subway turkey round placed in front of them or just sit there and stare and stare at it, common sense shows that these people would eat. However, it is possible that one person, like an anorexic, would just sit and stare at the sandwich. For that reason, it can be assumed that human beings do have free will, however the choices made are greatly impacted and seemingly determined by inherited basic needs, environment, and learned behaviors.

This leads us into a second assumption, rationalism or irrationalism. Do human beings operate primarily on the basis of intellect, or on the basis of impulses and passions? The answer is the latter theory. Going back to the Subway example, the most likely decision on whether or not to eat the turkey round would be based on an irrational impulse in one’s subconscious. The basic physiological need of food has a profound influence on the given choice. However, note that this is only the most likely response and not a definite one. There is always the chance that a person could make a conscious, rational decision not to eat. Because a people ultimately do have some sort of a conscious decision over their actions, it cannot be assumed that behavior is solely determined by irrational impulses.

The next assumption to be dealt with is one of the most argued and controversial of them all. Is human nature basically good or inherently evil? Naturally, most optimists would argue that people are born with a good nature, while other people of another persuasion would take on the opinion of an essentially evil disposition. However, human nature is a term that should neither be associated with good nor evil. In contrast, human nature is based upon inherited basic needs, environment, and learned behaviors, not morality, which is itself a learned behavior. An example of this would be murder. In most societies today, it is considered wrong, or evil, to commit an act of homicide if you kill a person because, for the sake of argument, they were walking too close to your home. However, thousands of years ago it may have been a part of life to kill someone intruding near one’s dwelling, looked upon as a display of territorial protection. Morality, the virtues of good and evil, is completely dependent on the social group from which you have adopted most of your learned behaviors. Therefore, good and evil are nonexistent and should be looked upon as terms of social acceptability.

The final assumption to be examined is normally a difficult one to address if one is trying to make a definite choice. It is the question of environment versus heredity. B.F. Skinner would argue faithfully that behavior is based solely on environmental contingencies, while Sigmund Freud would just as strongly maintain that the role of heredity determines the personality of an individual. I, on the other hand, believe that both sides of the debate are equally valid; personality is both the product of nature, in the form of the gratification of instinctual basic needs, and the product of learning and life experiences. For example, if something or someone were attacking a person, the basic need of safety would cause that person to seek refuge. However, where that person goes to find safety would likely be determined by learned behaviors and past experiences of the need for security. Therefore, personality is not a question of nature versus nurture, but is instead a combination of the two.

The rest of this paper will deal with the origin of personality and the way in which it proceeds to grow. In the first part, this “origin” will be referred to as the core personality and will be based upon heredity. The second part will look at the growth of personality as a sort of snowball effect with environmental factors and experiences continually adding to the core personality, making it more complex. Some of these factors include social groups, geography, and learned behaviors.

The Core Personality

From the moments of conception, your parents’ genes determine what many of your physical traits will be. Among these are gender, height, and skin color. These sorts of traits will have an effect on how the child perceives itself and how others perceive the child, consequently having an effect on the child’s personality. For example, this person could have some physical characteristic that is looked down on or made fun of by various people. This, in turn, would affect the individual’s self esteem and overall personality. Other characteristics that have to do with the mental capacity of the individual are also passed on through the parents’ genes. The justification for this assumption is that everyone has a different intelligence level, whether it is because of the size of the brain or for some other reason. I do not believe that there is anyone that would honestly be able to say that they think that all babies are just as smart as each other when they are born. The idea is ridiculous. Just as everyone is born physically different, we are also born mentally different. Therefore, the only factor that could initially affect the intelligence level of an individual before birth is the inherited genes of that individual’s parents. What is also included in this inheritance is the passing on of basic needs. These basic needs include physiological needs, which are all of the body’s requirements (food, water, etc.), safety needs, curiosity, the need for relationships, which is first encountered in the relationship between the mother and her child, and the need to reproduce. These basic needs are commonly thought of as instincts. However, instincts are actually the drive to gratify these needs.

The subconscious mind is created during these early stages of life and, because the brain has not yet developed fully and there have been no other factors to interfere in the decision making process, makes all the decisions for the person while still inside of the mother. There have been no profound experiences or learned behaviors at this point, so the only influence on the actions of the fetus are its basic needs. This means that the behavior is seemingly determined before birth. There are, of course, certain circumstances that may have a later effect on personality and its development. Any sort of trauma to the development of the infant at this point could have mild to drastic effects that could cause damage to the body and/or brain. This would include the use of various drugs by the mother, such as alcohol, tobacco, and crack, or some sort of physical abuse to the mother during the pregnancy. Each one is capable of causing some sort of mental or physical handicap to the infant. Common sense tells you that this would affect the learning capability or the physical capability of the child, thus having a definite change on the outcome of that child’s personality. Physical attributes, mental attributes, and basic needs are all passed down from parent to child. The core personality is therefore made up of all of these factors that are determined by heredity. After birth, everything that is experienced by the individual has an effect on that person’s personality and is added onto the core personality and makes it much more complex as it continues to grow and mature.

The Growth of Personality

The core personality makes up the basis of an individual’s personality for the rest of that person’s life. Personality growth, therefore, takes place as new experiences are added to that core personality. These new experiences come directly from a person’s environment. The first environmental factors that affect personality have to so with social groups. All people have the basic need to form relationships, so it is not surprising that the joining of social groups has a profound impact on learning and the development of the core personality.

The first social group that contributes to personality and behavior is one’s family, if you have one. A person’s parents are the first people that one learns from. Learning is accomplished through reinforcement and ideologies. To explain this way of learning we will look at a stereotypical family setting. An infant learns quite a bit from his family and uses that as the basis of most of it’s personality growth. From the time of birth, the individual is absorbing quite a bit of information from its surroundings. Parents act as examples for the infant and through reinforcement and by watching them the infant learns things like how to talk, how to walk, the proper way to eat, the proper way to go to the bathroom, and many other things that the person will use for the rest of his or her life. Also created through repetition is the individual’s sense of right and wrong, or conscience. The parents of the child are constantly saying “no” when the infant does something wrong and, usually, praising the child for what they consider right. This creates a system of ethics that the person will use in making decisions for the rest of his or her life. Children also look at their parents as role models. They adopt many behaviors of the parents and learn how to perform many tasks through mimicry. The financial class of the family can also play a major role in the development of the individual’s personality. It will determine where that person will live in early years and which luxuries the person will become accustomed to.

Other people, besides the individual’s family, play a large role in that person’s personality growth. These people include friends, teachers, or anyone the person interacts with. These people affect what decisions that person will make and they also provide new experiences the individual can learn from. Interactions with these people can affect self-esteem and provide different opportunities to explore the person’s identity. Religion also affects personality. Over the years, people who go to church have had the teachings of their religions reinforced repeatedly, causing the individual to adopt the beliefs of that religion. By accepting these beliefs, the way a person thinks and behaves is changed and, therefore, adds to that individual’s personality. In short, any social group or social institution will have a profound affect on one’s personality due to the basic need to form relationships with others. By joining certain social groups and accepting their way of thinking, a sense of belongingness is reached. So, because of the social groups a person joins, new experiences are encountered, new things are learned, and the personality grows.

Geography also plays a major role in the development and growth of personality. Depending on where you are born, there are different customs and different ways of doing things. Social standards are different throughout the world, so depending on where you were born, your personality could be drastically different. For example, in one country it could be quite normal to show public displays of affection or some other sort of sexual behavior. You might be walking down the street and see a couple making out on a park bench. But in another country, it may be against the law to even kiss another person in a public place. Also, if you were born into some tribe in Africa, it could be completely normal to see men and women walking around nude. Certain socially acceptable or unacceptable behaviors would have a serious effect on how open you are towards others. Any behavior that is heavily reinforced will have a great chance at becoming a learned behavior in a person, affect that individual’s personality, and have a substantial influence of the future choices made by that individual.

Natural environment itself can also play a role in one’s personality. Everything that is taken in by a person’s senses affects that way the person perceives new experiences and, therefore, adds to that individual’s personality. For example, in some studies, it has been shown that the color or temperature of a room can affect a person’s emotions. Also, if someone were placed into a dark room for a long period of time, there is a good possibility that he or she could become depressed, whereas, in most cases, that person, if put in an outdoor environment on a nice day, would be in a better mood. In conclusion, the physical environment one is in can affect that way that person reacts to new experiences, and can contribute to the development of the individual’s personality.

Perhaps the most important factor in personality development is the aging process. Depending on one’s age and maturity level, new experiences are perceived differently, adding in different ways to the core personality. An infant learns differently from a teenager, and a teenager learns differently from an adult. At an early age, children learn mainly through mimicry and reinforcement, primarily from social groups, and view the world depending on how their basic needs are met. If the child’s basic needs are met, that child will learn to trust the world as a dependable provider of support, and to trust their own urges and instincts as reliable guides to behavior. If basic needs are not met, a sense of mistrust is born, giving the person a tendency to withdraw socially. An example of this would be a child who is provided with a loving, nurturing environment, as opposed to one who is physically abused. For the child who is loved, basic needs are being met, and that child will have a tendency to be more loving and probably more socially outgoing. In contrast, the child who is being abused is obviously not being shown the love it needs and, in addition, its basic need of safety is not being met. This child will have a tendency to not be very trusting of people and, therefore, be more socially withdrawn. The learned behavior depends on which basic needs are being met. As the body matures people become aware of new experiences, either because they are given the opportunity by society, probably because they are at the “right age,” or because the body is going through certain physiological changes that cause individuals to become more interested in different areas. For example, once a person goes through puberty, the sexual drive and need to reproduce is intensified. A young boy who before had not been interested in having a relationship with a member of the opposite sex now has this urge. A physical change in that persons body had a direct effect on his personality. As people get older, changes in needs also contribute to the core personality. When people’s bodies become mature, certain needs are sometimes eliminated. An example of this is the high calorie diet of a growing person. At younger ages, the body burns more calories and, therefore, creates a higher level of energy in youths when their caloric needs are met. On the other hand, adults are fully-grown and require fewer calories in their diet. That is why adults are not as energetic, which contributes to fewer new experiences, slowing the growth of the core personality. Another need that is changed, or, specifically, intensified with age is the need to reproduce. This usually appears in conjunction with the need to form a lasting bond and relationship with a member of the opposite sex. In most of today’s societies, these needs are gratified through some sort of marriage ceremony and the making of a family. As people get older, their personalities change less. The snowballing effect that at one time showed rapid growth in an individual’s personality, steadily slows. This is because most previous behaviors that have been reinforced over time become more and more a part of their behaviors. Most people end up in a certain routine that is repeated sometimes every day.

New experiences are less frequently contributors of new learned behaviors. A fundamental example of this is the ability to learn a second language. As most people are aware of, it is quite a bit easier for younger people, especially children to learn a different language. This is because rules of grammar have not been reinforced as much at an early age and because the language has not been spoken for as long of a period of time. Adults require a longer period to learn the new language because it contradicts what has been reinforced to them for years. In old age, new experiences have little to no effect on a person’s fully developed, complex core personality. There is usually a period of review of one’s overall life. It can be looked at in one of two ways, either with integrity or with despair. The question is asked, “If I had another chance, would I live my life the same way?” If you look back and declare your life satisfactory or better, you have achieved integrity. If you fail to achieve this, and cannot emotionally “own” your life when it is too late to change it, you will fall into despair. With the sense of integrity comes wisdom; despair brings only disdain.

Summary

In review, the assumptions made in this personal theory of human development were that human beings do have free will, however, the choices made are highly influenced by inherited basic needs, environment, and learned behaviors; irrational impulses are the primary bases for choices; human nature is neither good nor evil, but instead based on basic needs, environment, and learned behaviors, not morality; and personality is the product of both heredity and environment. The individual has a core personality that is made up of the physical attributes one inherits from his or her parents and inherited basic needs. These needs include physiological needs, safety needs, the need for relationships, and curiosity. Throughout life, different experiences and learned behaviors contribute to make the core personality grow and become more complex. These experiences come from the environment the individual is surrounded by, including different social groups (families, friends, financial classes, and religions) and geographical location (nationality, customs, and physical environment), and from changes in the basic needs of the individual as a result of aging and physiological changes in one’s body. As people get older, the snowballing effect of the growth of personality, which is quite rapid in early years, slows down, resulting in less change of one’s personality. A final period of review of one’s life is experienced in old age by asking if you are satisfied with the way that you have chosen to live your life. Personality is, therefore, an always-changing entity that is unique to each person because of that person’s unique heredity and unique life experiences.