

# INTRODUCTION

## Why this book?

Every scientific discipline makes use of its own language in order to do justice to the particular phenomena with which it is concerned. For newcomers it is important that they learn this language, and especially the theoretical concepts employed for purposes of description and explanation. Developmental psychology is no exception to the prevalence of such concepts, and an essential part of finding out what the subject has to offer is to become acquainted with these terms. What, for example, is meant by **modularity**? Or **epigenesis**? Or **goodness of fit**? (terms in bold refer to concepts described in this book). This book sets out to make the more important concepts presently in use in developmental psychology readily accessible to students, by defining, analysing and discussing each in much greater detail than is usually done in textbooks. As I found out myself in writing an introductory textbook (Schaffer, 2004), it is rarely feasible to do full justice to the meaning, origins and usage of these terms; a special source of reference is therefore required which will hopefully not only help students to learn the relevant language but will also be used as a basis for discussion and serve as a spur for further consultation of the literature.

At the same time it is hoped that 'old hands' in developmental psychology will also find the book of help in checking their own ideas about particular concepts. It is highly desirable that we all share the same meaning attached to these terms, for one of the functions of a concept is to act as a communicative device in conveying certain theoretical propositions. However, it is by no means uncommon that different people give a somewhat different gloss to a term; moreover, the meaning attached to a concept is not necessarily static and set in stone for evermore; theoretical shifts may bring about a somewhat different usage even though the same term is retained. As far as possible therefore we need to avoid conflict and confusion, and it is intended that this book will be a means of pinpointing the reasons why such problems of definition arise in certain cases. Sharing meanings becomes even more important when we consider that concepts are not merely used by academics in theorizing about their data; they may also become part of the vocabulary used by practitioners – as seen, for example, in the use of the term **scaffolding** by teachers, of **bonding** by paediatricians and of **identity crisis** by psychiatrists and social workers. It is thus all the more necessary that we take care in the way we use language: terms need to be defined carefully so as to avoid misunderstanding which might then spill over into the kind of action taken by professionals.

A review of concepts is especially timely now because of the very considerable changes that have taken place in developmental psychology over the past two or three decades. In part, these changes reflect the great expansion of research activity we have seen over this period and the consequent increase in data calling for explanation. Even quite new topics have been added to the research agenda: **theory of mind**, for example, surfaced only in the 1980s but quickly grew into one of the busiest areas of study. New methodologies, such as those associated with **connectionist**

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**networks**, have surfaced recently, and the rapid advances of neuropsychology and behavioural genetics have also increased greatly the need for additional or, in some cases, revised theorizing.

However, the changes have not just been quantitative but also qualitative, in that the way we think about, explain and study development have in certain quite fundamental respects been transformed. For example, the prevalence of cross-sectional studies to investigate development is increasingly giving way to longitudinal designs, calling attention to the need for a **life-span** perspective and giving rise to such new concepts as **equifinality** and **multifinality**. Just as significant is the abandoning of simple, single-variable explanations for many developmental phenomena and their replacement by multivariate models that do far greater justice to the complexity of children's lives. Investigating the effects of maternal employment, for example, is no longer a matter of merely comparing children of employed mothers with children of non-employed mothers; rather, a large range of mediating and moderating variables are also taken into account, reflecting the many child, parent, family and social characteristics that also have to be incorporated into explanatory models. And to mention just one other change: developmental psychology has become less compartmentalized, in that it has become increasingly apparent that the traditional rigid division into areas such as cognitive, affective and social aspects does not serve us well in describing real-life behaviour. Again there are implications for the use of concepts: it may be, for example, that instead of having two concepts referring respectively to **emotional competence** and **social competence** we require only one, namely affective-social competence. Once again we see the need for keeping the list of concepts currently in use under constant review and ensuring that the way they are employed is widely shared.

### What are concepts?

Concepts are the mental tools with which we think about a topic. They help us to organize, categorize, analyse and explain; they enable us to impose meaning on a diversity of observable phenomena; and they are thus essential to the task of advancing knowledge. They are not observable themselves – Newton did not *see* gravity but found it a useful device for explaining falling bodies. Freud too did not directly perceive the unconscious, but used it to account for a variety of mental phenomena such as dreams, neurotic symptoms and slips of the tongue. And similarly in developmental psychology: we do not, for example, *see* **internal working models**, but infer them from what we do see and find them of help in explaining what is out there in the real world – ‘a useful fiction’, as they have been described.

Concepts vary in how near they are to observable facts: **temperament**, for instance, is a lot nearer to the kind of behaviour the term refers to than such a much more abstract term as **deep structure**. Every concept, however, is tied to some specific set of empirical phenomena, and the limits of this set is therefore part of the specification of the concept. In fact, some concepts are rather more fuzzy than others, at least in their early stages of development, and it is then up to further work to ensure that their boundaries of reference become clarified. Let us also note that some concepts are really only summary labels for a group of phenomena: the term intelligence, for example, is really nothing more than an umbrella term or short-hand device used in referring to certain kinds of behaviour. Other concepts, however, go beyond their descriptive function and derive their value from being able to explain and make sense of our experience. Their contribution is heuristic: they serve to impose meaning and to lead to new insights. If they fail adequately

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to do so they will in due course be discarded and replaced by other concepts. The distinction between purely descriptive and explanatory concepts is sometimes difficult to make; nevertheless, in this book I have attempted to confine myself to the latter kind: umbrella terms like attention or sibling relationships are thus not included, nor are terms referring to methods and procedures such as Strange Situation or sociometry, however closely they may be associated with certain theoretical frameworks and however much they merit mention as procedures for generating data relevant to certain concepts.

Most concepts do not exist in isolation, but together with other concepts form part of a network that is encompassed in a general theory. Freud's psychoanalytic theory provides a good example: concepts such as the unconscious, regression, oedipal fixation and libido are all related to each other and form the building blocks of the theoretical framework. All the major theories that have been applied to developmental phenomena, such as Piagetian theory, social learning theory and information processing theory, similarly require the use of a range of concepts. Thus on the one hand a concept has a formal relationship to some particular set of observable phenomena, and on the other hand it is related to various other concepts forming part of the same theoretical framework. Both kinds of relationships need to be spelled out by the proponents of theories.

### What are key concepts?

Some concepts clearly play a more significant part than others. Thus **attachment** has come to be widely recognized as central to our understanding of many facets of children's and also adults' socio-emotional life, and any list of key concepts is likely to include it. However, such near-universal agreement is rare: ask any dozen developmental psychologists to nominate their preferred key concepts and you are likely to come up with a dozen different lists. There will be a fair amount of overlap, but given the differences in people's theoretical orientations and in their special interests within developmental psychology it is inevitable that their nominations will not be identical.

In compiling my list I was very much aware of this dilemma and tried at least to minimize the subjective element. I consulted a large number of textbooks, many of which contain useful glossaries or lists of key concepts attached to individual chapters, in order to get some measure of consensus. However, it was interesting to note that even among texts covering one specific area, for example language acquisition, certain terms were given prominence by some authors while others did not even mention them. I also consulted the curricula for developmental courses as taught by different psychology departments and as set for nation-wide examinations. However, I am under no illusion that I have pleased everybody with my selection; my own preferences and biases no doubt played a part in what is on offer here. But such a subjective element is unavoidable; after all, when a Professor of Moral Philosophy at Princeton University decides that a whole book should be devoted to the discussion of just one concept, namely bullshit (Frankfurt, 2005), a certain latitude must be allowed for personal idiosyncrasy.

### How to use the book

It is intended that the book will act as a source of reference for its readers, in that it offers definition, description and discussion for each of the concepts selected. It is not like a

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dictionary, in which the items are listed alphabetically; rather the concepts are arranged thematically, grouped in nine sections with titles corresponding to the kind of chapter headings usually found in textbooks. The entry for each concept contains three parts:

**1** *Meaning.* A definition of the concept is offered here, but also some comments on how the term is used. In some cases the meaning is clearly understood and widely shared; that of others (and not necessarily the most recent ones) is rather more controversial, in that different people use them in somewhat different ways. Mention is also made in those cases where several different terms are used to designate the same concept.

**2** *Origins.* Some concepts made their first appearance quite recently, signalling the emergence of a new field of knowledge (e.g. **gene-environment interaction**) or of a new theoretical perspective (e.g. **dynamic systems**). In such cases one can pinpoint their emergence with a fair amount of precision. This is not so with a surprisingly large number of other concepts, many of which have been in use for centuries, even since the days of Ancient Greece, when they made their first appearance in the writings of philosophers (**temperament** is one example). The precise origins are then much more difficult to identify; any historical changes that may have taken place in their use can, however, be described.

**3** *Current status.* Many concepts come and go; being mental tools they will be discarded if found wanting. Quite a few of Freud's terms but also some forming part of Piagetian theory are examples that come to mind. This book focuses on those in current use, but where relevant to do so, mention is made of doubts that at least some people have as to how helpful the concept is. Sometimes, as a result of further work, it has become apparent that further refinement in the meaning of a concept is required. In quite a few cases, for example, it is clear that the concept is not the unitary entity it was thought to be and that it is therefore necessary to break it down into several components (e.g. **egocentrism**). A particularly important issue is the impact a concept has on present-day research, and an attempt is therefore made briefly to summarize the kinds of questions the concept has stimulated and the answers that have emerged from research.

In so far as some concepts are closely associated with other concepts, I felt it preferable to keep their presentation together under one entry. **Attachment**, for example, is tightly linked to the concepts of **internal working models**, **secure base** and **goal corrected behaviour**, and to discuss each under a separate entry would make it difficult to convey their interrelationship.

There are two main ways in which the book can be used. One is as a means of learning about some specific concept: thus students may want to consult the book in conjunction with a textbook in order to find out in depth what function the concept serves and why it is regarded as helpful. Anyone interested in a particular concept can go straight to it by locating it either in the Contents list or in the Index; for those wishing to study a topic in more detail than is possible in a book aiming to be concise, there are suggestions for further reading at the end of each entry.

However, the aim is also to make the book readable as a whole, with a narrative style that will make it possible to peruse it from cover to cover and so get a sense of how concepts in general are employed in present-day developmental psychology. Also, each of the nine sections of the book can function as a unit, and by means of the cross-references given at the end of the entry for each concept the reader will be able to pursue some general area of interest and get a sense of how any one concept fits into the general picture.