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Needs, Habits and Children's Wellbeing

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Introduction

I think that child rearing practices can be divided into two categories, as needs oriented and habit oriented. The needs oriented approach is historically represented by psychoanalytical theories and the habit oriented approach by behavioral theories (conditioning theories). In this essay my aim is to present basic assumptions of these two approaches concerning human (child) nature and discuss possible problems of adopting the habit oriented approach in the practice.

The Needs Approach

If you make a short search on the word "need" in the psychoanalytical literature you will be amazed by the number of occurrences of this word. In the psychoanalytical literature, all theorists agree in the importance the concept of needs in understanding human motivation, the development of personality and emergence of psychopathology. However, theories differ in their formulation of the content of needs. "Need" in Freudian theory has its origins in our evolutionary past (phylogeny). Need, as the word implies, is fundamental, if it is a biological need, it is fundamental to the survival of the organism and its healthy development and existence, like vitamins or minerals. If it is a psychological need, it is fundamental for the healthy development and existence of the self. Within the psychoanalytical theory needs of children are changing with the age of children. Psychoanalytical theorists emphasized different needs, a need for secure attachment [1] a need for tenderness [2], a need to be held [3] a need for safe anchorage [4] a need to relate [5]. Not long ago, Brezelton and Greenspan [6] wrote about irreducible needs of children, and stressed that satisfaction of these needs is a must for healthy psychological development. Importance of the needs in the psychoanalytical theory continues to be an important topic currently [7] Needs of children must be appropriately satisfied for a healthy development. If needs are not appropriately satisfied by the care givers, developmental process starts to get derailed from its normal, healthy progression. Satisfaction of basic psychological needs of infants and children are on the shoulders of the care givers. Therefore psychoanalysts refer to development of psychological disorders as environmental failure [3]. Underlying "the needs" approach to development is the assumption that children have a potential to grow and develop, if the immediate environment provides necessary psychological nourishment. Similarly, assumption is also shared

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by humanistic psychologists. For example C. Rogers [8] thought that development of a child was similar to that of a seed. A seed contains a potential to grow and become a fully grown tree, if necessary conditions are met, like water, good soil, sun light. The need approach to childhood and psychopathology recently gained importance outside of psychoanalytical quarters. The self determination theory [9] claims that humans have three basic needs, autonomy, relatedness and competence. Satisfaction of these needs may lead to psychological wellbeing however their frustration leads to psychopathology. One important difference between the self determination theory and the psychoanalytical theories is that the former neither has a qualitatively different childhood needs nor a developmental theory. In psychoanalytical theories, the age of a child is important in determining which need is the most important at a given time [10,11]. Fairbairn (a famous Scottish psychoanalyst who offered the most radical reformulation of the classical Freudian theory and developed the object relations approach) described childhood in terms of three concepts, i.e. immaturity, impulsivity and vulnerability [5]. Childhood is understood as qualitatively different from adulthood. Children are impulsive because they do not have the psychological mechanism to control their behavior, they do not have a well developed Ego, a regulatory system. They are immature because of the same reason, lack of a well developed Ego, which can control and tone down impulses. Yet they are very sensitive and vulnerable, their Ego is so fragile it can easily be hurt. Within a holding environment, as Winnicott claimed [12], and containing interactions as Bion stated [13], within a secure anchorage which is provided by their care givers, children's developmental process will go in its "normal" course. Because a child is impulsive, immature, vulnerable and also inexperienced, she is bound to make lots of errors. Learning from experiences

is a fundamental element for growth, however this can happen in a containing environment provided by caregivers (especially mother's) love and care [14].

I think of childhood as a period where the child can make errors freely, with no fear, so that he or she can learn from her experience. A child needs a loving, caring, nonthreatening, safe environment where she/he can freely express her wishes, drives and can own them. Owning of drives is the first step for developing an awareness of them (Heavens). In this way, the child can start to think and to evaluate her actions. All these processes are elementary methods of controlling and regulating her impulses and drives. These processes can take place in a loving and secure environment. If the environment is hostile, punitive and threatening, the child either will disown her impulses and lose awareness of them or may develop a reactive pattern or both. Rather than processing, evaluating her behaviors and learning from her errors, she may react to punitive and threatening behaviors of the care takers, may fail to develop any awareness of her own behaviors and their consequences, and thus not learn from her experiences. I think all selves need a secure, loving and accepting environment to develop and flourish. In this approach needs, self, emotions and development are critical concepts. In the psychoanalytical approach what the children are feeling (emotions) are more important than what they are actually doing (behavior) [3,15].

The Habits Approach

On the other hand, psychologists trained within the conditioning and learning paradigm, childhood is defined through terms like behavior acquisition or habit formation. Unlike psychonanalists, they think that childhood is a time for preparation to adulthood. In this view, children should be trained to acquire necessary behavior patterns required for adult life. There is no inherent value of childhood. The concept of "developmental needs of children" has no place in the learning approach. Children are to acquire appropriate behaviors with reward and punishment regiments, stimulus control procedures and exposure methods. A brief search in behavior therapy textbooks for terms like needs, self and development will reveal that these concepts are almost nonexistent. Rather, a behavior therapist focuses on behaviors and environmental stimuli regulating it. More specifically environmental consequences like reinforcers and punishers, or stimuli that elicit the behavior like conditioned stimuli and responses are important. To identify these variables they apply behavioral analysis. They aim to identify how the habits were acquired and discover environmental factors that maintain such behaviors. Therapy targets unlearning the problem behavior and re-learning of more adaptive responses patterns. In this approach children's developmental needs and emotions are not addressed. Actually the underlying assumption concerning the nature of children in learning and conditioning oriented approaches is borrowed from British Empiricism. Children are treated as having no special developmental needs but rather having a very flexible nature, open to habit formations and conditioning. They

are treated as miniature adults lacking necessary habits and learning experiences. Childhood is understood as a preparation to adult life having no inherent value and qualities of its own. Approached within this framework, children are encouraged to acquire necessary behavioral patterns for reaching adulthood as quickly as possible. The emphasis is on "the behavior." I want to make this point clearer with an example. One of the well known textbooks widely used is " Behavioral Analysis and Learning" by Pierce and Cheney [16]. Actually, I use this book in my courses for senior psychology students. The book explains all classical and operant conditioning theories and concepts applying to everyday problems and psychological disorders and is very clearly written. However, because the book is written with the behaviorist assumptions concerning children's nature mentioned above, it makes an inevitable mistake by focusing only on the behavior and environmental stimuli ignoring developmental needs, self development and emotions. The authors report a case by Williams [17] where a child demands his mother's presence to go to sleep on page 112. Williams applies extinction procedure to eliminate this "problem" behavior. First the child is put to bed in his room and the mother leaves him alone. The child cries for 53 minutes alone in his room, nobody pays any attention and then he goes to sleep. This procedure is repeated everynight for 10 days, the child's crying time decreases day by day, until finally he is put to bed and goes to sleep in a short while without crying. His aunt's presence starts tantrums again, therefore a second 10 day long extinction process is implemented, thus the child is exposed to a total of 20 days of crying without any parental attenntance. The problem behavior is eliminated by this procedure. Authors show this decrease in the crying behavior with a graph in the text page (page 113). The most important point here is the age of the child, he is 20 months old. All through this process, child's emotions and his needs for the mother and his developmental stages are not mentioned, because they do not exist theoretically. All focus is on the target behavior and manipulation of environmental factors thought to be responsible in maintaining this behavior.

Problem, Solved or Created?

According to most psychoanalysts a 20 months old child, just completed his crucial "trust vs mistrust" (0-18 months) stage [10] is in strong need for caretaker's love, care and attendance [3,15]. Security and safe anchorage is a fundamental need of his age. Demanding from a 20 months old child to sleep alone in his bedroom will severely frustrate his fundamental need. It is like asking him to act like an adult. Frustration of basic needs especially during childhood was claimed to have debilitating effect in later years by many psychoanalysts [18]. How prolonged frustration and not responding to crying can have debilitating effect on his fragile self was addressed recently by Narvaez et al. [19]. Did the extinction procedure eliminate the tantrums or created an environmental failure by letting a 20 months old young cry unattended for 20 days ? Did Williams really solve the problem behavior or did he inflict an emotional wound in the child's self?

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