Theory Reflections: Global Holistic Human Development and Identity Formation

Every one of us is on a journey, a journey of life in which we grow, change, and develop along several dimensions—intellectual, social, civic, physical, moral, spiritual, and religious. And we do so holistically, i.e., we simultaneously develop our mind, sense of self, and relationships with others, or some would say, our mind, body, and spirit (or head, heart, and hands).

As we develop, we are engaged in meaning making, i.e., making sense of our journey in life. Making sense of the world in which we live is not only an intellectual pursuit since as we develop most of us become more complex and integrated in our thinking, feeling, and behaving. This journey is not a linear one, however, and is filled with challenges, setbacks, and failures, as well as successes. Finding meaning in our experiences is motivating; these experiences become an integral part of who we are as persons with goals, values, and encounters with the world around us. "People invest themselves in certain activities depending on the meaning these activities have for them," (Maehr and Braskamp, 1986, 62). Thus, being and doing are intricately related. The inner and outer life—the interior and exterior life of a person— are connected and reinforce each and thus need to be studied in concert. We are more than what we do.

My view of holistic human development encompasses two theoretical perspectives: human development theory and intercultural communication. The first is based on the seminal work of Robert Kegan (1994), who argued that three major dimensions of human development—cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal—need to be taken into account when humans make sense of their experiences. Patricia King and Marcia Baxter Magolda (2005) refined these dimensions in describing students in their social-cultural development during their college years. Students need to acquire "intercultural maturity," a term that describes how human beings strive and struggle in forming their beliefs about what is truth and what makes the most sense to them, their identity, and their relationships with others. Moreover students—and all persons—need to develop in all dimensions if they are to be effective members of a global society. Sharpening one's mind is insufficient.

I also have used the work of intercultural communication scholars, who stress the importance of living in multiple cultural contexts and being able to function effectively with persons with different cultural backgrounds, values, and languages. While they focus on communication, they also recognize that individuals incorporate the following cognitive, affirmative, and behavioral dimensions (i.e., thinking, identity, and relating) in effectively communicating in intercultural contexts:

- Cognitive development is centered on one's knowledge and understanding of what is true and important to know. It includes viewing knowledge and knowing with greater complexity and taking into account multiple cultural perspectives. Reliance on external authorities to have absolute truth gives way to relativism when making commitments within the context of uncertainty.
- Intrapersonal development focuses on one becoming more aware of and integrating one's personal values and self-identity into one's personhood. The end of this journey on this dimension is a sense of self-direction and purpose in one's life, becoming more self-aware of one's strengths, values, and personal characteristics and sense of self, and viewing one's development in terms of one's self-identity. An ability to incorporate different and often conflicting ideas about who one is from an increasingly multicultural world is now an important aspect of developing a confident self-identity.
- Interpersonal development is centered on one's willingness to interact with persons with different social norms and cultural backgrounds, acceptance of others, and being comfortable when relating to others. It includes being able to view others differently; seeing one's own uniqueness; and relating to others moving from dependency to independence to interdependence, which is paradoxical.

My conceptualization is also aligned with two other major frameworks about human development. First, I have incorporated into my thinking and research program the symbiotic relationship between the person and their environment. No one develops in a vacuum (Maehr and Braskamp, 1986). "The roles we play, the norms to which we conform, the options that we perceive as possible, allowable, and worthy are established by and set within a community, or multiple communities. These communities are often created around belief systems, and while individuals play special and important roles, these roles are enacted within the community" (Maehr 2005, 140). Other theorists in college student development have always recognized the importance of the college environment (Sanford 1952; Parks 2000), especially the importance of the influence of the college environment on students' development of a sense of self, often couched in terms of identity formation (e.g., Chickering and Reisser 1993; Parscarella and Terenzini 2005). Colleges are effective to the extent to which they can create a challenging and supportive environment, and encourage students to be involved in campus life (Astin 1985; Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward 2006; Light 2001).

Second, my views on holistic human development are consistent with the major tenets of positive psychology, "an umbrella term for the study of positive emotions, positive character traits, and enabling institutions" (Seligman, Steen, Park, and Peterson 2005, 410). This perspective begins with what is positive and normal about persons and the well-being of persons but also focuses on environmental conditions of fostering positive characteristics and well-being. This view can be expanded to incorporate the arguments about what is the "good life," defined by some primarily in terms of career success and others primarily by a life of meaning and purpose that is not always fully rewarded in a material way by the larger society but one that is rooted in a religious, spiritual, or faith tradition broadly defined (e.g., Gomes 2002). Thus my perspective allows for a normative interpretation of human development, which becomes more apparent and challenging in a pluralistic global society.

In sum, in our pluralistic society humans beings no longer can think in terms of living in a world in which we can or should avoid learning, meeting, and living with others with very different and potentially conflicting cultural backgrounds, habits, perspectives, customs, religious beliefs, and aspirations. We live in a global world, where multiple worldviews and salient cultural traditions influence how we think, develop our sense of identity, and form relationships with others. In short, each of us needs to develop a global perspective in our journey in life.

Measuring Holistic Development

My colleagues and I have constructed a self-report survey instrument to measure the major dimensions of global holistic development, as we defined it, and the major conditions of the sociocultural environment that college students encounter. The Global Perspective Inventory (GPI; Braskamp et al. 2010) consists of six scales, with each dimension—cognitive, intrapersonal, and interpersonal—having two scales. For each dimension, one scale reflects the theory of human development and the other reflects intercultural communication theory. Three sets of items measure sociocultural characteristics of a campus—Community, Curriculum, and Co-curriculum. These clusters of items are based on our research on case studies of how ten colleges and universities develop students purposively (Braskamp, Trautvetter, and Ward 2006). In constructing the GPI we stressed the connections between holistic student learning and development (the "desired ends") and the campus environment (the "appropriate means") to reflect our view that person-environment interactions are important in development. The GPI was constructed to facilitate discussions about what interventions—activities, programs, courses, events—may be influencing the progress students are making in becoming global citizens or developing a more global perspective in how they think, view themselves, and relate to others unlike them. In this way, our work takes into account the many complex factors that can contribute to the development of students, while providing them with the tools necessary to make sense of the world and their place in it.

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