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TITLE: Development and Learning: Themes and Conclusions

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#### ABSTRACT

This chapter draws on information from previous chapters to assess where we are with our thinking about adult development and to suggest linkages between this theory and learning in adulthood.

The adult developmental literature has had, and continues to have, an enormous impact on the ways in which we conceptualize adult learning and on our practice as adult educators. For example, many adult educators adopt, as part of their practice, the goal of helping learners to be more self-directed in their learning. This goal has been fostered by numerous adult educators, but its major origins can be traced back to one of the five assumptions of andragogy: "as a person matures, his or her self-concept moves from that of a dependent personality toward one of a self-directing human being" (Knowles, 1980, p. 44). This tenet was grounded in the work of scholars from the psychological tradition of development who for years posited autonomy as the pinnacle of human development (for example, Maslow, 1970; Kohlberg, 1973).

Although autonomy has been challenged as the highest form of development by many researchers during the last two decades (for example, Gilligan, 1982; Caffarella and Olson, 1994), many adult educators still practice their craft as if being autonomous characterizes mature adult life. In other words, some developmental theory even drives research and practice in adult education long after that theory has been questioned and alternative theories proposed. Because the theories of adult development significantly affect adult education theory and practice, we need to ensure that our knowledge of these theories is current and that we understand how it can inform our practice.

In this chapter we first assess the initial framework we used in organizing this volume. We then discuss how our own thinking about developmental theory has changed, focusing specifically on how we define integrative models and the promise that approach offers for theorizing adult development. We conclude the chapter with an exploration of how thinking differently about adult development influences the ways in which we think about adult learning.

#### REVISITING THE TYPOLOGY OF ADULT DEVELOPMENT

In Chapter One, we provided an introduction to the many facets of adult development and the links between development and learning. Our initial premise was that a four-component framework offered by Merriam and Caffarella (1999) would provide a useful starting point for thinking about different ways of understanding development in adulthood. Viewing development through biological, psychological, sociocultural, and integrative lenses allowed us and the other contributors to this volume to address both the complexities of development and how this knowledge can enrich our practice as adult educators.

We believe our initial sense has been borne out. This typology did give us a more complex and nuanced sense of the adult development process. But it also enabled us to see something else. When we consider the latest work in this area, across all four categories of our typology, we notice that we seem to be beyond (at least for now) the crafting of grand theories of development like those offered by Erikson (1982) or Levinson (1986). With the exception of the integrated models (which, as we noted in Chapter One are not yet well developed), more recent work seems to focus on specific dimensions of development and often on a combination of dimensions. This is true even in the traditional areas of biological and psychological development. As Mott observes, the physical aging process involves much more than just bodily changes; it includes both how we and others think about aging. Therefore, how we age becomes a function of a complexity of factors, including the connections among the mind, body, and the culture in which we live. Likewise Reeves, in her chapter on psychological development, notes that there have been numerous challenges to the explanatory powers of the more classical theories, among them the idea that autonomy is the hallmark of development and that contextual factors have relatively little

influence on how adults develop. Now it is commonly accepted that connectedness and interdependence are as important in the developmental process as autonomy and that context is highly salient.

If the traditional approaches are waning, it is obvious that the newer perspectives are in full flower. The sociocultural frame, which emphasizes the social and cultural aspects of our lives as the primary forces that drive development, has received more attention in the developmental literature recently. In no small part this expanded attention is due to the increased saliency today of issues related to gender, race and ethnicity, and sexual identity. In her chapter Ross-Gordon presents multiple ways of understanding gender identity development and explores the extensive and complex impact of cultural forces on this process. Chávez and Guido-DiBrito introduce us to the work on racial and ethnic development—a body of literature that is of increasing importance as we struggle to embrace diversity in our society. And Edwards and Brooks, in their chapter on sexual identity development, explore the tensions between the essentialist and social constructionist perspectives on sexual orientation. Here again we see new work unfolding as nondominant modes of sexuality become more common and more socially accepted.

There has been a shift in the literature on adult development toward thinking about development in a more integrative way; we believe that the most significant and promising work is now being done in this frame. This trend toward integration and multiplicity of thought is two-dimensional. First, many scholars, even within the biological and psychological frames, are acknowledging the importance of taking into account elements from at least one other frame and often more than one, therefore arguing for a more holistic view of development. This trend was seen in all of the chapters we have summarized thus far. The second dimension relates to alternative ways of thinking about how development unfolds in adulthood. The four chapters in our section on integrative models illustrate this. Each provides a different lens through which to view the developmental process, and each produces a different picture. Taylor, in looking at the notions of separation and connection, points to the work of theorists who argue for a complex and changing balance between these fundamental drives. Merriam shows us how the various conceptualizations of time provide a new way of understanding change and development. Rossiter, in her discussion of development as narrative, offers an entirely different position from which to view and evaluate the developmental process. And Tisdell, in her chapter on spiritual development, suggests that the ultimate meaning adults give to their lives provides yet another way to understand the developmental process. The richness and variety of these approaches impresses us greatly, and we suspect that this approach to adult development will continue to expand and to exert a growing influence on our understanding of the life course.

### **IMPLICATIONS FOR ADULT LEARNING**

As we noted at the outset of this chapter, the literature on adult development has had a far-reaching impact on the field of adult education, particularly in shaping the theory and practice of adult learning. In the past those linkages have related primarily to how we can teach most effectively. We have been sensitive to how the biological changes of aging affect learning, for example, or how various life events create incentives for adults to participate in adult education experiences. These insights and others like them are all valuable, and they will continue to shape our practice. But this newer literature on adult development seems to be influencing our field in another way.

We are now being challenged to interpret our professional experience in new ways. In a real sense we are prodded to see what used to be less visible and to hear what was formerly unspoken. We can no longer ignore or take for granted issues of "otherness": gender, race and ethnicity, class, sexual orientation, religious commitment, social status.... The list has no end. We must take difference seriously. It is being taken very seriously in the literature on adult development, and it must be taken seriously in adult education as well. This, of course, is already happening, but the point cannot be overemphasized. Awareness of the changes in the adult developmental literature is just one more reminder of this.

We're also being invited to think more creatively about the impact of development on our students. New metaphors provide new insights, and these can only benefit our field. We believe that we will continue to refine our practice as we learn more about development; there is no reason to believe this trend will change. But we suspect that more attention will be given to the interaction of learning and development in the future, especially to the impact of one on the other. However it plays out, we are certain that the connection between adult development and adult learning will continue to be a fruitful one.

## ADDED MATERIAL

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