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From the children of today to the adults of tomorrow

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ABSTRACT

This address describes a process of maturation from three perspectives – first, the maturation of a researcher who has conducted a longitudinal study from middle childhood to middle adulthood; second, the maturation of the research participants; and third, the maturation of the present generation of children. To support the latter, knowledge on human development should be disseminated in many fields. Besides publications, other aims and means merit considerations. These include strengthening the value accorded to research-based knowledge, respect for expertise, social relevance of research, awareness of social context, and the channelling of information in novel ways, such as a scientifically authored open data bank that makes knowledge on human development available to everyone.

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KEYWORDS Maturation; longitudinal study; dissemination of information; knowledge on human development

It is a great honour to be invited to address you on this occasion of the European Conference on Developmental Psychology. I have taken my title ‘*From the children of today to the adults of tomorrow*’ from my biographical article included in a book, *Pillars of Developmental Psychology*, edited by Frank Kessel (2024), but the topic is treated differently. Here, I approach the theme as a triangle whose angles represent the maturation of the researcher, research participants, and the present generation. To make these perspectives more concrete, I first describe them in my own life and thoughts and encourage you to think of them in yours.

Maturation of the researcher

For a girl born in the beginning of the Second World War and without an academic family background, the likelihood of a scholarly career was

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small. I went to a rural school which had two classrooms: one for grades 1–2 and the other for grades 3–6. It was rare to move on from there to secondary education, but my parents, encouraged by my teacher, took me to sit the entrance exam of a secondary school in the nearest town. The year was 1950. It opened a study path for me.

When, in 1958, the time came to enter university, various events steered me to the then Pedagogical Institute of Jyväskylä, Finland. The Institute formally became the University of Jyväskylä a few years later. It was there that I attended an introductory course in psychology given by Professor Martti Takala. For me, his course opened a window on scientific thinking, and he subsequently became my mentor. In 1962, in his reading seminar, which included the book *Birth to Maturity* by Kagan and Moss (1962), I first learned about longitudinal research. I was thrilled. At school, I had amused myself by trying to imagine what kind of adults the children I knew would become in the future, and I now learned that somebody had studied this very topic.

My doctoral dissertation (Pitkänen, 1969), which began as a cross-sectional study on children's socioemotional behaviour, evolved into the Jyväskylä Longitudinal Study of Personality and Social Development (brief title: From Child to Adult), in which I followed the development of the same individuals from age 8 to age 50. A comprehensive summary of the results to date was published 55 years later (Pulkkinen, 2017), and the study continues under the direction of Dr Katja Kokko.

Early in my education I had understood that to build a post-doctoral academic career I would need to undertake further studies abroad. I obtained a British Council scholarship, packed my two daughters into the car, and headed to Sussex University in the south of England to study social psychology during the academic year of 1972–73.

My trajectory of international activities developed via chains of acquaintances and mentors in learned societies – in particular, since 1979, the International Society for the Study of Behavioral Development (ISSBD). Within the ISSBD, I met Professor Paul Baltes, and soon became involved in the administration of this society. Subsequently, I chaired the 10th Biennial Meetings of the ISSBD in Jyväskylä in 1989, and became its President for five years, from 1991 to 1996.

The European Association for Developmental Psychology, the organizer of the present conference, arose out of the regional conferences of the ISSBD held in Europe, titled the biennial European Conferences on Developmental Psychology. I was President of the ISSBD in 1994 when

the European Association was founded. I didn't see it as posing a threat to the ISSBD, as some people had feared it might. On the contrary, I expected it to strengthen developmental psychology in Europe.

Maturation of the research participants

As I matured as a researcher, the participants in my longitudinal study transitioned from childhood to adulthood. They had been born in 1959, only a couple of years earlier than my own children, whose development I was thus able to reflect on at the same time. So, what then was the core idea of the follow-up study?

Developmental psychological research in the 1960s typically focused on problem behaviours. Positive social behaviours did not become a major target of study until the late 1970s. Theoretically, it was typical of that time to see 'sense and sensibility', that is, rational thinking and feelings, as separate entities.

However, in working on my doctoral dissertation in the 1960s, I had speculated that human beings have a cognitive capacity for reflecting on their intentions, emotions, and the consequences of their behaviour, and for exercising control over these, that is, for regulating their emotional behaviour.

I devised a two-dimensional impulse control model in which the horizontal axis depicted the amount of cognitive control over emotion, and the vertical axis the expression or inhibition of behaviour (over activity versus passivity). Both active and passive behaviours may involve emotionality. Low cognitive control of emotion may appear as the uncontrolled expression of impulses, such as aggression and other externalizing problem behaviours, or as the uncontrolled inhibition of impulses, such as anxiety and other internalizing problem behaviours. Likewise, high cognitive control over emotion may appear in the controlled expression of impulses, such as constructive problem solving, or in controlled inhibition of impulses, such as compliance. In the psychological literature, a functional approach to the study of emotion regulation did not emerge until the 1990s.

My findings with children confirmed the model. The longitudinal study has shown that low self-regulation at age 8 and 14 is associated with various aspects of social functioning in adulthood that are the outcome of cumulative consequences, such as lower post-comprehensive education, longer duration of unemployment, heavier

drinking, and more criminal offending. High self-regulation in childhood and adolescence is, in turn, associated in adulthood with greater success at school, higher occupational attainment and income, refraining from substance use, and a stronger sense of one's obligations to society. The results have also shown that children's developmental paths are associated with the quality of parenting.

Maturation of the present generation

Knowledge of life-span development has increased immensely through the work of researchers from different disciplinary backgrounds. At the same time, developmental psychology has strengthened as a discipline. The problem remains of how to make this knowledge about developmental processes and the factors affecting them known in the many fields where it could be used for the benefit of present generations.

The dissemination of information is, to my mind, an important task of people who have the requisite knowledge, that is, researchers. We already do this via textbooks and popular publications in multiple languages, but we should also consider other aims and means of dissemination, such as I will turn to now.

The first aim is strengthening the appreciation of knowledge. In many disciplines, such as in medicine, investments are regularly made for securing the serviceability of novel ways to improve physical health. However, when decisions about novel ways concern people's psychological functioning, the research base often remains weak, and lay opinions and political goals get mixed in and tend to dominate. The appreciation of scientific knowledge arises from trust in research-based information. We should work towards increasing such trust in relevant research findings and press decision makers to make their research-basis public.

The second aim is supporting respect for expertise. Expertise in human development refers to the vast knowledge represented in the results of basic research and understanding of their applicability to the real world. Developmental psychologists should be well-trained to work in advisory groups in which scientific knowledge from different sources is coordinated to support decision making.

The third aim is the production of socially relevant research. Scientific knowledge should be supplemented by socially relevant research. This means giving researchers opportunities to obtain funding for exploring – together with field workers – the

applicability of their basic research findings to specific practical issues. I have noticed that research of this kind is encouraged in the Netherlands.

The fourth aim is to take cognizance of societal contexts into account. To be able to properly apply research findings requires reflection on the role of developmental psychological knowledge in different societal contexts. Given that the concept of life-span development refers to the knowledge of individual development from childhood to late life, there is currently a need to give more systematic consideration to people's different life situations that affect their development. Developmental psychological knowledge can be utilized to enhance the well-being of the present generations, not only in the domains of child-rearing, education, and care work, but also in those of housing, working conditions, and attitudes towards the marginalization of individuals, without forgetting big issues such as immigration, climate change, and economic crises.

The fifth aim is to improve the channelling of information. Channels are any means used for the dissemination of knowledge on human development, such as education, publications, and participation in public debate. An addition to the present channels might be a scientifically authored, open data bank that provides information digitally in written, video and other forms, thereby making access to knowledge on human development a resource for all people.

The question of what kind of adults of tomorrow the children of today will become could be considered in a new light, if access to knowledge on human development became a shared resource. Perhaps the sharing of knowledge would increase respect for individual differences, promote cooperation instead of competition for scarce resources on this planet, and lead us to care more for each other.

I wish you a successful and enjoyable conference!

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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