



Transactions in an Elusive, Meaning-Making Odyssey

A Review of

The Transactional Model of Development: How Children and Contexts Shape Each Other
by Arnold Sameroff (Ed.)

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009. 290 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0467-0.
\$69.95

doi: 10.1037/a0017645

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In this much anticipated and overdue collaboration, Arnold Sameroff expertly and cleverly knits together seminal work by experts in the field by elucidating the bidirectionality of environmental influences on child development while simultaneously and deftly presenting the evolution of the transactional model of development. In the opening chapters of *The Transactional Model of Development: How Children and Contexts Shape Each Other*, Sameroff presents an overview of the theory behind the research and the evolution of the transactional model of development.

The edited volume moves from the parent–child microcosm of infancy and early childhood to the social context of the school and wider society, with each successive chapter addressing some of the concerns raised by the previous study. Chapters focus on the development of temperament, behavior, and cognitions through transactions with the environment, addressing some, but raising even more, questions about plasticity and resilience in shifting the limits of human potential. The final section, New Directions, synthesizes research and theory, stimulating further evolution of the transactional model of development. The recursive format of this volume is an excellent foil for the transactional model as it both highlights and reminds the reader of the dynamic nature of development—of both children and theory alike.

The transactional theory has long been used as a mainstay in public health, where the bidirectionality of interpersonal, organizational, community, and public policy factors in guiding health behaviors is well established (e.g., Babalola & Lawan, 2009; Cohen et al., 2003; McLeroy, Bibeau, Steckler, & Glanz, 1988). Developmental psychologists, however, have focused on the interactionist perspective, attributing developmental changes to genotype–phenotype interactions that modulate the distance toward the attainment of potential. The child and the environment are viewed as static entities, with the child passively receiving, adjusting, and changing in accord with environmental stressors.

Transactional theorists, on the other hand, posit that the relationship between environmental variables and the child is dynamic. The interactions between the child and environment constantly change the actors and substrates, redefining relationships and modifying the developmental trajectory between the components of the system. Thus, both the child and the environment adjust as a result of their interaction, affecting subsequent interactions with each other. Sameroff's overview is equally accessible to both the uninitiated and initiated on the transactional model of child development.

A major question raised by the transactional model of child development is how to synthesize random and isolated acts of violence executed by youth. The escalation of violence perpetuated by and on children in the United States has raised fundamental questions about what in our social matrix provides such fertile ground for these excesses. We are more comfortable explaining and accounting for the violence experienced by children in zones of conflict; when normal social order and interactions are violated and human survival is dependent upon pushing the limits of what's acceptable, a greater latitude of social behaviors is condoned.

Social chaos, disenfranchisement, and the desperation of conflict zones turn normally developing children into emotionless purveyors of war who often perpetrate the most violent and atrocious acts (United Nations, 1996). The actions of child soldiers in war-ravaged countries have been attributed to their desensitization as a result of repeated exposure to high levels of violence and loss, coupled with the disruption and breakdown of family, community, and governmental support systems. The transactions between the child and the social matrix are modified as the drive for survival dominates. In the absence of such complete breakdown in normalcy, we as a society grapple with understanding the widespread violence in the United States.

Cicchetti and Lynch (1993) postulated that the prevalence of, attitudes toward, and pervasiveness of violence within cultures, local communities, and families affect children's ongoing development and adaptation. They argued that environmental, caregiver, and child characteristics influence each other, making reciprocal contributions to the events and outcomes of child development that could be either potentiating or compensatory. They differentiated between transient and enduring factors, and postulated that when potentiating factors outweigh compensatory ones, the risk for child maltreatment increases.

In a one-year longitudinal study of a sample of maltreated ($n = 188$) and nonmaltreated ($n = 134$) children, 7–12 years of age, Lynch and Cicchetti (1998) found that rates of maltreatment, particularly physical abuse, were related to levels of child-reported violence in the community, and child maltreatment and exposure to community violence were related to different aspects of children's functioning. Recent empirical data from a national survey of 1,245 urban adolescents (12–17 years of age) revealed both increased levels of posttraumatic stress disorder symptoms and delinquent behaviors among boys and girls exposed to higher levels of family violence, community violence, and sexual assault (McCart et al., 2007).

In the chapter "Social Information Processing and Aggressive Behavior," Fontaine and Dodge (pp. 117–136) postulate that focusing on general cognitive functioning, decision making, and social information processing mechanisms alone does not provide a complete understanding of the developmental characteristics of the adolescent to account for the "persistent pattern of serious juvenile violence" (p. 120). The authors attribute the rise in aggressive behaviors to the evolution of reciprocal interactions between the self and one's social experiences (including the impact of an individual's behaviors on others) that accounts for the variability in outcome following exposure to the same events/circumstances. Unraveling and deterring the propagation of violence necessitate an understanding of the transactional context before a multipronged public health care approach can be used. It is this optimism that we can unravel many of life's mysteries that continues to spur much of our academic research.

As a transactional theorist, I am very appreciative that Arnold Sameroff spearheaded this initiative and has finally given us in the field of human development an accessible and invaluable resource. This well-overdue edition provides theorists, researchers, epidemiologists, specialists in human biology, educators, psychologists, and anyone interested in child development a persuasive case to look at the context to understand the child. The final section of the book is directed toward researchers and provides a vignette of new statistical and research tools that can help researchers uncover and understand the transactions that produce change. Alan Fogel's concluding chapter echoed my sentiments as I read the volume.

Capturing a snapshot of transactions is as elusive as trying to comprehend the ocean by studying a single wave and serves as a reminder that one will never truly understand the mechanisms of development. While this compilation draws together leading researchers and theorists on psychosocial and cultural development, it stops short of addressing how child–environment transactions affect intelligence, higher order cognitive functioning, morality, or the upper limits of human capacity. Notwithstanding, *The Transactional Model of Development: How Children and Contexts Shape Each Other* is an excellent resource for educators, clinicians, and researchers, and should become required reading for those who want to understand child development.

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