

Bringing a Developmental Lens to the Study of Primal World Beliefs: Editorial Introduction to the Focal Issue

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Few psychologists would seriously discount the importance of a developmental perspective for understanding adult psychological functioning. After all, how can we really understand any psychological phenomenon in its prototypical adult or “mature” form (i.e., “mature” level of organization) without understanding its development (i.e., other levels of organization across the lifespan)? The mature forms of a phenomenon are necessary for understanding the nature of those forms that both developmentally precede and follow from them (e.g., we cannot fully conceptualize an egg without knowing its potential to become an adult chicken). But just as importantly, those developmentally prior and potential subsequent forms are necessary for understanding the basic nature of any given mature form (e.g., we cannot fully conceptualize a chicken without knowing both its once having been an egg and a chick and its potential geriatric turns). Yet it is not at all uncommon for extensive conceptual and empirical scrutiny in the psychological sciences to proceed absent any kind of developmental perspective. That is, phenomena of interest in psychology often receive rigorous delineation and examination at the level of their adult forms *without* parallel efforts aimed at tapping what forms of developmental organization both precede and succeed those “mature” forms – as if such developmental considerations were merely an afterthought or secondary to a phenomenon’s conceptualization.

Practically speaking, when the adult forms of a psychological phenomenon have already undergone

considerable conceptual mapping in what amounts to a developmental vacuum, largely divorced from developmental considerations, what steps do we, as developmental scientists, need to take to bring legitimate developmental sensibilities to bear on that phenomenon? How do we go about transforming conceptualizations of adult phenomena into developmentally appropriate frameworks of investigation and conceptualization? What sorts of metatheoretical and metamethodological complications attend to either the translation or transformation of adult-oriented work from other subdisciplines into the domain of developmental inquiry? The purpose of this focal issue is to promote discussion of and reflection on these questions. And it does so through specific consideration of theory and research in the study of an adult form of belief that has garnered considerable interest of late: the notion of primal world beliefs or beliefs about the nature and qualities of the world *qua* world.

The opening article of our focal issue, from Lansford et al., was originally submitted to the journal as a standalone manuscript, providing the developmental community with a welcome introduction to the study of primal world beliefs and to some initial speculation concerning their development. However, as the manuscript’s peer review process unfolded and yielded decidedly different conceptual and methodological takes on its contributions to the field of developmental science, I realized that Lansford et al.’s piece warranted far more involved follow-up considerations than the

journal's standard "commentary" mechanism could afford. I therefore invited both reviewers of the initial manuscript to elaborate their own, full-article perspectives on the opportunities and challenges that Lansford et al. have placed before developmentalists. What follows is designed not as a final word on the question of how to developmentally inform adult-oriented theory and research but as an initial foray into articulating and adjudicating the complexities that face our discipline in its application of a developmental perspective. Enjoy!

David C. Witherington, Editor-in-Chief

Statement of Ethics

No ethical approval was required for preparation of this manuscript, as no human or animal subjects were used.

Reference

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