Development in Context:

An Analysis of the Impact of Events

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**Introduction**

Everyone experiences influential life events. These events impact future development of personality, learning, and family. Below is a discussion of three events in the life of a 28-year-old man. This paper will refer to this man as “Jim”. The first event described was a crisis event for Jim and it had significant impact on his personality development. The second event described was an event in which Jim had to display resilience and it influenced the development of learning for Jim. The third event demonstrated Jim’s pursuit of wellness and was influenced by family factors. These events will be described and discussed in terms of their developmental significance. Each event will also include a discussion about the influences of normal and abnormal development in the concepts they relate to.

**Crisis Event**

**Introduction**

When Jim was in fourth grade, he was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), put on Ritalin, and transferred to a private school. While these interventions were well intentioned, the combination of new medication and the transfer to a new school felt like a crisis to Jim. The medication and transition caused him to become more reserved and, as a result he had a difficult time making new friends. This period of time led him to fall into a depression that lasted through high school. This crisis was important in Jim’s personality development. Below is a discussion of the impact, along with a discussion about the factors that contribute to normal and abnormal personality development.

**Developmental Concept**

**Big Five Personality Dimensions.** The Big Five theory of personality identifies five traits of personality: openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism. These traits are both genetically and environmentally influenced early in a person’s life and are not purposed to change over time (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). However, it is interesting in Jim’s case as his self-perceived measures of extraversion changed when he experienced this big transition.

**Ego-Control and Ego-Resiliency Theory.** According to Jack Block (1996), personality development is influenced by an individual’s ability to control his impulses. This ability is called ego-control. Some individuals are better equipped to shift their levels of ego-control across situations. That is, they display more ego control in situations where it is needed, like in school. These individuals are rated as having higher levels of ego-resiliency and tend to be more flexible, adapt better to new situations, and display a broader set of behaviors. Individuals who are less ego-resilient prefer more stable situations and have difficulty coping with stress and anxiety. Jim was diagnosed with ADHD, which likely means that likely he had low levels of ego-control. However, this changed when he began taking Ritalin.

**Big Five and Ego-Resiliency.** Farkas & Orosz (2013) attempted to measure the interaction between ego-resilience and changes in the Big Five personality traits in different situations. First, they measured each participant’s ego-resilience, using the Hungarian Ego-Resiliency scale (Block & Kremen, 1996). Next, they administered the Big Five Inventory to participants before and after they completed two solitary tasks. After completing the solitary tasks, the individuals were more likely to rate themselves as lower on the extraversion scale as previously. This was particularly true for individuals rated as having high amounts of ego-resiliency. This experiment is an example of the influence of context and ego-resiliency on short-term measurements of the Big Five Traits.

In the interview, Jim reported that his ability to meet and interact with new people changed dramatically when he experienced the crisis of changing schools and being put on medication. His rates of extraversion appeared to decrease. In comparing Jim’s situation to the experiment conducted by Frakas & Orosz (2013), there are parallels. When Jim experienced this transition, he was forced to become more solitary. He did not have any friends at his new school and even felt rejected by the other students. In addition, the new school required him to do more work so he was spending more time alone completing schoolwork. These factors combined with the fact that he felt less socially inclined on Ritalin caused Jim to feel less extraverted.

Frakas & Orosz (2013) stated that changes in extraversion were very short term, however, because Jim was alone quite consistently during this time, he was likely less extraverted more often. When Jim reflects on this time of life, it was a very lonesome time. However, when his context shifted and he was taken off medication, placed back into public school with his friends, and given more independence, he became more extraverted again. However, according to Jim, it took some time to feel back on track with himself and to feel outgoing again.

**Normal/Abnormal Development**

As demonstrated above, personality development can be impacted by situational, environmental, and contextual factors. In discussing personality, some theorists believe that personality is developed early in life and remains stable over time. The Big Five theory of development is an example of one such theory (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). Other theories purpose that personality develops over time, in stages. Psychoanalytic theory, for example, outlines stages one goes through as their personality develops. Still others purpose that the personality shifts through time and situations. An example of this is Albert Bandura’s social learning theory (Sigelman & Rider, 2015).

According to Social Learning Theory, an individual’s personality is constantly evolving, based on social experiences and observations. Ways of interacting with the world are either reinforced or discouraged. One can also learn by observing others experience reinforcement or punishment for their actions (Bandura, 1977). It seems, according to this theory that normal and abnormal personality development varies across situations. For example, an individual can be socialized “normally” to one context or social situation but when they transition into a different context, they may be perceived as abnormal because they are not adapted to the situation.

When viewed through this lens, it seems as if Jim’s personality development during this time could be viewed both as normal and abnormal. Jim had previously adapted and formed an identity of his personality at his first school, unmedicated. He was extraverted, and open to experience (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). On the other hand, he was considered by his teachers to have low levels of conscientiousness and agreeableness (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). Although his teachers struggled with having him in their classroom, Jim viewed himself as well adapted socially to his environment.

Jim’s self-concept changed when he was given medication and changed schools. The medication made him more inhibited and he felt isolated at his new school, making him more shy and introverted. While he felt well adapted previously, the context shifted and he did not feel as capable. So, although Jim’s personality evolved across situations (reflecting normal personality development), there were contextual factors, particularly Jim’s self-perception, that impacted his normal personality development and made him feel less socially adapted to his situation (reflecting abnormal personality development).

**Conclusion**

When Jim began taking Ritalin and was transferred to a private school, his personality seemed to shift dramatically. Jim reported that he became much more inhibited, introverted, and felt less well adjusted. These self-perceived changes caused Jim to view this transition as a crisis. He reported that the event caused him to struggle with a depression that took years to overcome. Perhaps Jim’s negative perception of these personality changes is a reflection of the high value he places on having friends and a light-hearted approach to life. There is a lot of debate about what personality is and how it develops and changes over time. For Jim, personality seems to be a function of congruence between values and behaviors.

**Event Related to Resilience**

**Introduction**

Jim’s struggles in school continued even after he was placed in public school again. He struggled to take school seriously and to balance his free time with structured learning time. As a result, his grades did not reflect his potential. In his senior year of high school, he experienced an event that shifted his view of education. Jim and his friends were playing with airsoft guns in their neighborhood after school. They took a walk with the airsoft guns and ended up going on school grounds, without realizing the potential repercussions. The marching band was practicing outside and Jim and his friends decided to prank his band teacher by shooting him with the airsoft gun. This decision eventually led Jim to receive a differed expulsion, where he was no longer allowed to attend high school, but could get his diploma by taking online courses. Jim chose to be resilient as a result of this experience. He made the most of this alternative education. In addition to completing his high school coursework online, he took classes at the local community college, and became more involved with extracurricular activities. Jim learned to manage his time better, create his own success, and feel capable in his education. Through this experience, Jim’s learning development shifted.

**Developmental Concept**

**Self Determination Theory.** Self Determination Theory (SDT) examines the role of motivation on the choices an individual makes. Intrinsic motivation occurs when an individual is motivated to complete a task for the sake of it. For example, someone may be intrinsically motivated when making art. Extrinsic motivation occurs when someone completes a task in anticipation of an external reward. Intrinsic motivation tends to be more powerful and persistent than extrinsic motivation. SDT purposes that when an individual identifies with the external motivator as in line with his values (called identified regulation), the quality of his motivation shifts and becomes as powerful as intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). An example of this is when someone graduates from high school because they value education. The external motivator is educational attainment, which is in line with the individual’s values. According to SDT, there are three types of motivation: autonomous (composed of intrinsic motivation and identified regulation), controlled motivation (composed of extrinsic motivation), and amotivation (when someone is not motivated at all) (Deci & Ryan, 1985).

Motivation is linked to achievement. A student who is autonomously motivated is most likely to gain higher academic achievement. On the other hand, an individual experiencing amotivation is not likely to be high achieving (Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien, 2010). These levels of motivation interact with a student’s self-concept. For example, a student with amotivation is likely to feel incompetent and not in control. According to a study conducted by Guay, Ratelle, Roy, & Litalien (2010), the relationship between self-concept and academic achievement is bidirectional and mediated by the type of motivation an individual experiences. So, when an individual views himself as capable, they are more likely to have autonomous motivation, especially when he believes he has control over his academics. Autonomous motivation is increased when an individual experiences social support.

SDT provides a great explanation for Jim’s resilience in his education after being expelled. Prior to his expulsion, Jim reported that he did not identify with his education. He was simply going to school because that’s “what people did”. His education was driven by extrinsic motivation so he was not living to his full potential.

Jim’s expulsion was the reality-check he needed to shift his mindset to become more academically aligned. When he was expelled, he began to understand that his educational success depended on him. He was able to see the long-term repercussions of academic attainment. With the shift in class structure, he was in complete control of his own education. He could decide for himself when to study, to take college courses, and had more time for extracurricular activities that would enhance his education. For example, he interned at a coroner’s office. These factors shifted his motivation from extrinsic to autonomous motivation. Education was now more ingrained in his set of values and he had more control over his education. Jim began performing better academically and thus his academic self-concept increased and he became more motivated to go to college. In his words, “the idea of college changed from ‘it’s is the next step for everyone’ to ‘I earned this’”.

**Normal/Abnormal Development**

Resilience occurs when an individual successfully adapts to changing life circumstances. Thus, normal development of resilience occurs when an individual is flexible and can become successful through trying times.

The event described above in which Jim was expelled from high school was, indeed, a challenging life circumstance. Jim adapted to this challenging event with remarkable resilience. In fact, when he reflects on this time in his life, he views this event as positive because it shifted his thinking and led him to change his mindset and find greater success academically. Jim’s experience, then, is an example of “normal” development of resiliency.

However, some individuals do not experience this level of resiliency. Sometimes the life circumstances are too intense, challenging, or persistent to adapt to. For example, an individual who was abused throughout their childhood may not be able to overcome their experience without outside help. Individuals are also more likely to display resiliency when they have social supports (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). These factors are indicative of the environmental role in resiliency.

Resiliency could also be impacted by an individual’s personality. For example, an individual who scores high on neuroticism on the Big Five Inventory will likely have greater difficulty adapting to changing life circumstances (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). Resiliency seems to also be genetically influenced because inhibited, slow-to-warm-up infants are more likely to develop into less flexible adults (Sigelman & Rider, 2015).

So normal and abnormal development of resiliency seems to be an interaction between nature and nurture. Jim was predisposed to be more resilient. According to our interview, he was not inhibited as a baby and adapted to new situations well. In addition, Jim had many social supports. These social supports helped Jim successfully navigate through this event and it’s repercussions.

**Conclusion**

Getting expelled from school was a negative event in Jim’s life that served a greater purpose for him. Through this challenge, Jim demonstrated resilience in his adaption to the changing life circumstance and educational structure. He was able to shift his mindset and thus his motivation in a very powerful way that led to academic ownership and subsequent success.

**Event Related to Wellness**

**Introduction**

The third event to be described is related to Jim’s development of wellness. When Jim graduated from college, he wanted to stay in his college town, but he was having a difficult time finding a job that was conductive to his success. This was when he realized he needed to make decisions for himself and his own wellness. He decided to move to another city, which was bigger and had more opportunities. In addition, Jim’s close friends lived in the new city and it was closer to his family. Jim’s social connections and family development were important during this transition.

**Developmental Concept**

**Belongingness Model.** According to research conducted by Slaten & Baskin (2013), an individual’s sense of belongingness in one’s family is an important factor in career decision. When one feels a sense of belonging in his family, he is less likely to experience psychological distress and more likely to display high levels of motivation, both important factors in career decision-making (Slaten & Baskin, 2013; Flouri & Buchanan, 2002). So, family connections are important in an individual’s sense of wellness, which contributes to the ability to make career-related decisions.

For Jim, it appears that family support and a sense of belonging was an important factor in his career decision-making. Jim’s family has always been very supportive of him and place high value on career aspirations. When Jim was living in his college town, he was distanced from his family and less influenced by their support. Perhaps the distance contributed to a decreased sense of belonging with his family. When Jim decided he needed to relocate, he decided to move to a town where he had friends and was close to his family.

When he moved to the new town, Jim was better able to find a job in line with his career goals. He began to consider his long-term future more. Although he did not make a decision right away about his long-term career, he began thinking about it more realistically. This shift in thinking was likely influenced by the amount of support he was receiving in his new town and the wellness he experienced as a result.

This move also influenced his future family development. When he moved to the new town, he made a romantic connection with a friend there, who would eventually become a part of his family though a life partnership. Clearly, Jim’s decision to move was influential on his family affiliations, his wellness, and his career development.

**Normal/Abnormal Development**

As mentioned above, family belonging has strong influences on an individual’s sense of wellness. According to John Bowlby’s theory of attachment, this sense of belonging develops very early in life. That is, the quality of an individual’s attachment, or sense of belonging, to one’s family early in life influences the quality of relationships formed later in life (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). Relationships are an important actor in wellness and optimal development.

Ainsworth purposed that there are four distinct types of attachment: secure, resistant, avoidant, and disorganized-disoriented. These attachment styles impact the success of future relationships, romantic and otherwise (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). For example, individuals that fall into the avoidant attachment style may find it difficult to form relationships because they appear to be indifferent towards other people. They may be less trusting of others and avoid intimacy because they believe it will lead to pain and rejection. These individuals tend to have caregivers who are either unresponsive to their needs or over-stimulating (Sigelman & Rider, 2015).

The secure attachment style is considered to be the most normal form of attachment. Between 60-65 % of individuals fall into the secure attachment category (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). These individuals actively explore the world and tend to form supportive relationships with others. Secure attachments form when parents are responsive, affectionate and allow and encourage the individual to explore the world safely (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). Individuals in this category have the best long-term outcomes (Sigelman & Rider, 2015). Jim likely has a secure attachment style. He feels comfortable exploring the world, develops strong and supportive relationships and is well adjusted.

Although individuals with a secure attachment are more likely to have better outcomes, people with insecure attachment styles can also obtain wellness. There are several therapeutic approaches which strife to shift an individual’s attachment style and help them form healthy, supportive relationships (Sigelman & Rider, 2015).

**Conclusion**

When Jim made the decision to relocate, it was for his own wellness. He recognized that the town he was living in was no longer serving him and his life pursuits. This decision was doubtless influenced by the support of his family, and his future career aspirations. In addition, it eventually led to the formation of a family of his own. Jim’s wellness was influenced by his relationships with his family members and his close friends. The sense of belonging that he felt influenced him to make steps towards his future.

**Summary**

The events described influenced Jim’s development in his personality, learning style, and family development. The these events illustrate the impact the environment can have on one’s development. They also display the impact of genetics. Jim was genetically predisposed to develop ADHD and to be resilient, for example. Viewing these events in context demonstrates the interaction between genes and the environment.

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