



MA ABE Teacher's License Module 3: Adult Development and Learning Theorists

The Adult Development Theory of Roger Gould

Basic Tenets

- Psychological growth takes place specifically between two opposing pulls.
- One is the need to grow and adapt, and the other is the need to preserve safety and the illusion of safety.
- Adult development is the gradual replacement of the child's sense of safety (which is now an illusion) with actual grown-up safety anchored in mature decisions.
- The process of psychological growth becomes arrested when there is a failure of adaptation.
- When there is a situation in which inner and/or outer reality demands actions, and the action is not taken, there is psychological pain.
- Symptoms are a consequence of being stuck and a sign that adaptation is required.

Roger Gould's (1978) theory charts inner stages of consciousness in which the adult gives up various illusions and myths held over from childhood. Gould sees this process as freeing oneself from childhood restraints and establishing a sense of personal identity. To Gould (1978), adulthood is a time of "dismantling the protective devices that gave us an illusion of safety as children (p. 39)." Confronting the myths of childhood results in transformations that lead to increasingly higher levels of consciousness (Dean, 2007).

Gould's transformations (1978) occur in a series of sequential, age-related stages, as follows:

- Leaving the Parents' World (16-22)
- Getting into the Adult World (22-28)
- Questioning and Reexamination (28-34)
- Midlife Decade (35-45)
- Reconciliation and Mellowing (43-50)
- Stability and Acceptance (50 and over)

The four major false assumptions adults must resolve during their lifetimes (Gould, 1978, p. 39-40) are:

1. "We'll always live with our parents and be their child."
2. "They'll always be there to help when we can't do something on our own."
3. "Life is simple and controllable."
4. "There is no real death or evil in the world."

Gould's Theory in Context

Researchers, students, and observers of adulthood development do not agree on what constitutes developmental progression. Some regard it as passage through a transitional period during which new coping skills are acquired: others, particularly psychoanalysts, regard it as recognition and mastery of some aspect of the nuclear neurosis of childhood.

For Erik Erikson, Daniel Levinson, and Roger Gould, it is a new posture or reconfiguration of the self in response to age-related realities of the life cycle. For George Vaillant and Gould, it is the substitution of more mature, reality-attuned ego defenses for the immature defenses that served in childhood.

An adaptational response is required to meet some demand implicit in a situational context and that context is frequently a transition, a crisis, a stressful situation, or a challenge. All people change with age, because new priorities in the life cycle require it. New attitudes and new behavior can be straightforward responses to new circumstances when there is no internal conflict among the agencies of the self. However, sometimes people cannot respond with the appropriate adaptational response, because that response is mired in internal conflict (inhibitions, defenses, character patterns). Their challenge is to free that response from conflicts so as to be able to respond appropriately and effectively. If they successfully resolve conflict that caused them to be rigid, they recover necessary functions that are defined by the actions they take.

Those who say there is no adult development but merely behavioral changes in response to changing circumstances are observing a simple non-developmental pattern change in a person for whom little conflict is associated with making that particular change. At the other end of the spectrum, therapists frequently observe immense struggles in patients responding to normal demands in the environment. The resistance to change is tied either to a nuclear neurotic belief system or to a powerful defense strategy. Attempts to change are countered by the activation of increasing levels of negative affect, the content of which is catastrophic predictions about potential adverse consequences.

A patient who is having so much difficulty changing a simple behavior pattern is often observed to be confusing the inherent demand of the current situation (which calls for a relatively easy change of behavior) and some earlier adaptational demand that required the patient to mobilize or maintain the pattern that now ought to be changed. The patient's conflict is between two different frames of reference in time; it is a situation in which the past has more power to compel behavior than does the current situation.

Graphic Expression of Gould's Theory

