

A COMPELLING IDEA

How We Become the Persons We Are

Alan Sroufe



Brandon, Vermont

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First Edition

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Prologue

Fifty years ago, we had a very limited understanding of how the person develops. Today we know a great deal, largely due to a revolutionary theory about the role of relationships in human development, and this new information has profound implications for our personal lives.

This book is a personal account of this emerging understanding of human psychological development. The discoveries described have of course involved many people, as is true of all major scientific discoveries; others could certainly tell this tale. It is the case that fortune and circumstance put me in an opportune place to observe how the discoveries came together. Our research team at the University of Minnesota Institute of Child Development carried out many important parts of this work. The technical aspects and complete results of our project (officially named the Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood) have previously been presented to academic audiences in our books, *Emotional Development*^{*} and *The Development of the Person*[†], and in more than 200 journal articles and book chapters. My goal in writing this book was to provide a more personal and reader-friendly account of this story.

The subject at hand—how individual persons develop to be who they are—is a personal one. It is about how we each come to behave as we do and see the world as we do, and about what we feel and how

* Sroufe, L. A. (1996). *Emotional development: The organization of emotional life in the early years*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

† Sroufe, L. A., Egeland, B., Carlson, E., & Collins, W. A. (2005). *The development of the person: The Minnesota Study of Risk and Adaptation from Birth to Adulthood*. New York: Guilford Press.

we respond to those feelings. Research findings certainly shed light on these issues. However, in addition to quantitative research findings, there are numerous anecdotes from individual lives in this book, lives that were studied carefully and systematically over the course of more than 40 years, from their infancy, childhood, and adolescence, through their early and middle adulthood. As I wrote the book I was, of course, careful to disguise all persons portrayed in order to protect their privacy, and certain details were necessarily omitted. However, I felt free to take somewhat more detailed examples from my own life, as my own past and personal ups and downs were pertinent to the story being told. And my motivation to pursue this field of inquiry was very personal. I wanted to know why I had the problems I did and how my own mental health could be improved.

For these reasons, the book is written as a descriptive account of the series of discoveries that led to this new understanding of the development of persons, as well as the personal sense I made of them. It will reveal what motivated my personal interest in this general question, the longstanding and chance relationship encounters that led me to do this work, the experience of participating in what has become a thoroughgoing revolution in psychology, the nature of some of the core discoveries, and how the work has impacted my own life.

In thinking about our new understanding of development and judging whether our understanding is adequate, I have often been inspired by scientists in other fields. Prominent physicists, for example, have talked about the search for a final theory—the theory that will fully explain the origins and workings of the universe. In his book *Dreams of a Final Theory*, Steven Weinberg lays forth the criteria for such a theory. Prominent among these criteria is that the theory be “beautiful.” By this he means that it not only is coherent and unifying, but that it also has a certain degree of elegance. It grants to those who understand it a sense of harmony and unity. It literally has an aesthetic appeal. The harmony and coherence of the theory resonates

within the person who contemplates it. It causes things previously only vaguely known to click into focus and come together in a new way. In short, it makes great sense.

This struck me as a very attractive construct, and while I think psychology is a long way from having a final theory, recent decades have seen the emergence of a truly compelling theoretical idea about human development. It concerns how we become the persons we are. Like the universe, the emerging person goes through a process of development in which what was there before provides the basis for what is to come, complex though the transformation over time may be. At the center of this process for humans are close interpersonal relationships. Many scholars have noted this over time, but today there is a coherent, overarching framework for understanding how relationship experiences create persons.

There are both problems and advantages in formulating theories of psychology. For unlike other areas of science, in this case we humans are both the subject of the theory and the theorist. We are attempting to explain ourselves. This certainly carries potential pitfalls when hubris or other forms of bias enter in. Psychological theorists may be attracted to theories that make psychologists look good or at least better than others. I think a prime example of this is the attraction of many psychologists to the idea that IQ is the most important characteristic. Since IQ tests were designed to relate to academic success, it is no surprise that psychological researchers fare well on such tests. This is but one example of how features that are prominent in psychological theories at times are those that characterize psychological scientists.

On the other hand, there is a clear advantage to an alignment of subject matter and scientist. More than in any other field, any theory we create should make sense to us. Many theories from the past have not been satisfying for precisely that reason. Theories proposing that we are simply buffeted about by the rewards and punishments in our

environment, that we are prisoners of our internal drives, or that our natures are determined by our genes just don't make adequate sense. As important as these influences may be, they really don't adequately explain our behavior or how we became the particular, unique persons we are. The critical importance of close relationships, as described in John Bowlby's attachment theory and other developmental accounts, not only is empirically demonstrable but also squares with our intuitions and personally lived experiences.

The core of the idea is that early close relationships actually provide the pattern for who we become. This is both a simple and elegant idea that, in fact, summarizes in a compelling way what is a very complex developmental process. It is entirely possible to describe this process in such a way that anyone who wishes to can understand it. And it offers the coherence and clarity that we would wish to see in our psychological theories. The unfolding of the person is a beautiful thing to behold.

There are many ways that a story can be told; for example, a writer can start at the end and then go back and show how the end came about or withhold certain information so that the end remains a mystery until the final chapter. There will be no mystery here. You will know from the beginning that the study to be described did in fact achieve powerful results. There will be glimpses of ultimate outcomes from the start. At the same time, the emphasis will be on the step-by-step description of the discoveries—how one finding led to the next question and then the next finding. After all, this is a story about development, and development proceeds in an orderly manner. My greatest hope is that readers of this book will share in the excitement of discovery.