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1-1-2005

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Moshman, David, "Tabula rasa" (2005). *Educational Psychology Papers and Publications.* Paper 115.
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Published in *Encyclopedia of Human Development*, ed. Neil J. Salkind (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 2006).
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Tabula rasa

David Moshman

English philosopher John Locke proposed that the mind of the newborn infant is a *tabula rasa*, or blank slate, on which experience writes. Locke was an empiricist. Development, in the empiricist view, is the product of an active environment operating on a passive mind.

One alternative to empiricism is nativism. Nativists propose that the human genetic heritage includes knowledge accumulated over the course of evolution. Thus the mind of the newborn, far from being a blank slate, represents the knowledge of generations. Development, in the nativist view, is a maturational process directed by the genes. It is genes, not environments, that account for developmental change.

An alternative to both empiricism and nativism is constructivism. Constructivists propose that the mind is an active agent in its own development, and not just an outcome of environmental and/or hereditary forces. Development, in the constructivist view, is a creative process directed by an active mind.

There is evidence for all three of these views. Research on learning, socialization, and enculturation shows the powerful influence of environmental and cultural forces in directing the course of development, as expected by empiricists. Research on infant cognition has shown remarkable competencies at unexpectedly early ages, supporting the nativist view. And research on children of all ages shows that ongoing processes of interpretation, reflection, coordination, and reconstruction are indispensable to developmental change, as argued by constructivists.

The existence of evidence for all three of these views rules out strong versions of any of them. If environments, genes, and minds are all important sources of developmental change, then none of these alone is the basis for development. Virtually all developmental psychologists see development as an ongoing interaction of environmental, hereditary, and constructive forces. Theorists differ, however, in which factors they highlight and in how they conceptualize those ongoing interactions.

The intellectual descendants of Locke are learning theorists who stress the role of the environment. Over the past several decades, however, learning has increasingly been viewed as an active process of construction made possible by the genetic heritage of the human species. Thus, differences among contemporary theorists are mostly a matter of differing emphases rather than stark disputes over what single factor causes development.

For parents, teachers, and others who work with children, there is no doubt that environments can and should be organized to promote learning and development. Empiricism reminds us that, no matter what else is going on, children are learning from their environments, and such learning contributes to their development. Thus, empiricism supports the assumption that socialization and education are worth the effort.

Blank slate empiricism goes too far, however, in its presumption of environmental determinism. We cannot determine the course of development for our children or students. Development is a self-regulated process guided, in part, by genes and mental actions. Parents and teachers who understand this process may be able to encourage it, contribute to it, and even influence its course. If we think we can direct and control a child's development, however, we may intervene in ways that do more harm than good.

The infant is surely not a *tabula rasa*, and its development is not simply caused by its environment. Psychologists continue to debate, however, how much knowledge we should attribute to the infant at birth, and how minds, genes, and environments interactively generate developmental change.

Further Readings and References

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