

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Research on Young Blind Children's Development: Struggles With a Deficit Model and Cognitivism Language Development and Social Interaction in Blind Children*, by M. Perez Pereira and G. Conti-Ramsden; Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 1999.

Although this book is about early language development in blind children, it provides rich insight into paradigmatic limitations of current research on motor and cognitive development. The book presents an exhaustive history of research on blind children's development and a clear and thorough discussion of major theoretical claims in the field, as well as supporting and conflicting evidence. The methodological critique of research on blind children development in general and language development in particular is extremely thoughtful. On the other hand, we are disappointed with the field itself, a disappointment it seems, at least in part, that the authors share. We even found that the authors' methodological critique is much ahead of (and at times on odds with) their own research, as that research is reported in the book.

The book is organized around two intertwining narrative lines. The first one reflects a traditional view of language development: a progression from prelinguistic development of motor and cognitive skills to development of phonology, then to lexicology, then to syntax and morphology, then to pragmatics, and finally to the development of parent-child verbal interaction. This traditional view of language development defines the book's organization.

The second narrative line is a history of conceptual and methodological approaches to the development of blind children. As the authors argue, the initial research and conceptualization of blind children's development came from psychoanalytic perspectives, focusing on how congenital and early blindness interferes with the development of the *ego*. The methodology of this early work was often based on anecdotes and nonsystematic observations of blind children's behavior. This conceptual framework led many researchers to conclude that congenital and early blindness arrests the development of *ego* in the children and leads to autism and mental retardation. These researchers cited such apparently autistic behaviors as echolalia (i.e., child's repetition of phrases said by an interlocutor) and stillness and passivity when spoken to by an adult.

The authors criticize this approach from a methodological perspective and in light of more recent evidence. They demonstrate that nonsystematic observations and anecdotes often highlight unusual cases (e.g., blindness accompanied by other mental problems). The authors also argue that we should not equate behavior with its function. Echolalia in blind children without mental problems has a different function than echolalia in autistic or mentally retarded children. Recent evidence reveals that echolalia is much less widespread in blind children than it was formerly believed, and it also suggests that echolalia probably serves as a means to learn language and cultural practices for blind children. More recent research also calls into question the earlier assumption that the stillness of blind infants is a sign of their disengagement with others. On the contrary, for blind children this stillness seems to indicate their attention and interest in the interaction.

With the cognitive revolution, research on blind children's development shifted from psychoanalytic to cognitive approaches. In this new family of approaches, a blind child came to be viewed as a person with deficient information-processing capacities. These deficiencies may delay or even arrest motor, cognitive, and language development. For example, it has been observed that young blind children more often confuse pronouns like *you* and *I* than sighted children do. Cognitive theories propose semantic or syntactic rules to predict when the pronoun confusions occur in young blind children's speech. The rules reveal deficits in specific information-processing devices that cause the confusion. Methodologically, the cognitive approach often uses tests in contrived circumstances to check the information-processing capacity of a blind child's cognitive and linguistic devices.

The authors of the book criticize this cognitive approach to blind children's development, from several directions. First, the traditional cognitive approach implies a universal developmental sequence for all children. On this one developmental pathway, blind children can be either behind sighted children's development or not develop at all in some areas. The authors argue that there are many developmental pathways for both sighted and blind children. From this perspective, any deviation from the ideal pathway of sighted children may be not a deficit but rather a functionally worthwhile alternative. Second, like all individuals, blind children actively deal with problems they face and they often develop compensatory strategies and mechanisms in the face of problems caused by blindness. For example, blind children's interaction with objects and space is highly mediated by sighted people (siblings and adults) as evident in blind children's skillful use of visual properties of objects in their language (such as color) and visual commands (like "look," and "see"). Although blind children are physically excluded from the possibility of learning these words through direct perception, they manage to learn them through socially and linguistically mediated experiences. Third, the authors criticize traditional cognitive approaches for the decontextualized methodology they use with blind children, failing to take

into account what sense (if any) the children make out of tasks presented in these contrived cognitive tests.

In our view, the authors unfortunately stop short of calling for an ecological (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gibson, 1986) and sociocultural (Cole, 1996; Rogoff, 1990; Varenne & McDermott, 1998) approach to blind children's development. They are still limited by a view of blindness as an individual phenomenon—although it is possible to find interesting insights in the book leading away from individualist approaches, the authors themselves seem reluctant to follow their own lead. Ecological and sociocultural approaches to development and learning focus on how culture, institutions, social milieu, environment, and individual mutually construct and define each other. In this sense, blindness as a human phenomenon, and sometimes as a problem, cannot be understood outside culture, history, society, and environment. It is not simply a question of what blind children can or cannot do. For example, the inability of a blind person to read regular print text is no less rooted in the individual than in the print itself (since reading is clearly possible using the Braille system).

Thus, blindness is rooted not only in a child who is blind, but also in cultural practices that are available for them and their caregivers, as well as in caregivers themselves. Perez Pereira and Conti-Ramsden cite Fraiberg, "it is the exceptional mother who can help her blind children circumvent major handicaps without counseling" (p.44). Different parenting of blind children is partly responsible for differences in blind children's development. For example, many counselors encourage parents to develop special routines that signal their blind infants about upcoming events (e.g., putting the infant's hand in the bath water before starting a bath). This parenting strategy contributes to the infant's mastery of his/her own attention and communication with sighted adults. However, the parenting itself depends on parents' access to and support of institutions like counseling that may not be available for all parents. Thus, it is disappointing that research on blind children's language development seems largely to ignore cultural practices. Finally, the traditional split of language study into separate fields like phonology, lexicology, syntax, morphology, semantics and pragmatics, which shapes the book's organization, is also problematic if the authors want to depict "the process of development, rather than in particular behaviors" (p. 58).

We would recommend the book all those who are interested in learning where the field of blind child development is, as well as for those interested in critically examining how the cognitive tradition has shaped the course of disability research.

REFERENCES

- Bronfenbrenner, U. (1979). *The ecology of human development: Experiments by nature and design*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

- Cole, M. (1996). *Cultural psychology: A once and future discipline*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Gibson, J. J. (1986). *The ecological approach to visual perception*. Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Rogoff, B. (1990). *Apprenticeship in thinking: Cognitive development in social context*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Varenne, H., & McDermott, R. (1998). *Successful failure: The school America builds*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Renée Hayes
Eugene Matusov
University of Delaware
School of Education
206 D Willard Hall Newark
DE 19716, USA
Email address: ematusov@udel.edu