Sokoto Educational Review
Vol. 8, Vol. 1

NEUROTICISM: Its Implications on Character Development of Children

Dr. AISHA MADAWAKI ISAH

Abstract

This paper takes a look at Neuroticism as a psychological construct and its implication on character development of children. In doing this the writer assessed the development of children from birth to the period of adolescence. She also examined character development in children and the concept of neuroticism showing its implication on the character of children. It was recommended that adult protection and love (from parents and teachers) could go a long way to enhance proper character development in children. A neurotic child on the other hand should be referred to a counselling psychologist or psychotherapist for assistance.

Introduction

Man, from birth, is constantly involved in many physio-psychological processes. These processes result in changes that serve to relate him to his environment. This is what Piaget refers as "Adaptation": A man will of necessity change in accordance with the dictates of his physical, intellectual and social realities; accommodating new values and assimilating the ever-changing systems of life to achieve equilibration – that physio-psychic state of harmony between the individual and his environment – (Stones, 1966: 34). This explains why man is seen to be in constant pursuit of this harmonious state of existence as exhibited in his quest to develop his outward appearance, improve on his roles in life and exploit the totality of his unique, inborn qualities and biological attributes. Human character is couched upon this fundamental universal premise.

In other words, every individual is constantly involved in carving out a unique personality for himself. As he develops or matures biologically from birth to adulthood, the genetic properties inherited at birth are progressively refined by environmental forces. This include parental commands, school training and peer group influences, all of which serve to build in the individual, a character worthy of gregarious existence, and for the fulfilment of his personal ends. Character here, will be understood in its social context as relating to the demands which society makes upon the individual and which draws upon such traits as: honesty, self-control, persistence and sense of justice. It relates to qualities which we can define as socially acceptable or objectionable and incorporates the development of attitudes and values" (Child, 1981: 237). An individual's behaviour, therefore, is often judged against the background of the norms and values of the society in which he finds himself, and a good character is one that conforms with these norms and values. Gabriel (1968: 29) observed that

> Each social group has its specific problems, needs values and ideals so that when we speak of a "good character" we refer to the individual's consistency, his power of direction, his self-control in seeking the solution to such problems and the fulfilment of social purposes and social ideals.

Maslow (1970) asserted that the ultimate goal of human effort is fulfilment, growth and happiness. Therefore, the infant is constantly given protection, toilet training and introduced to the moral values of the society, all in a bid to design in him a character that will guarantee a successful adulthood – with a concomitant ability to integrate into the socio-cultural system of the larger society. Implied in the above assertions is the fact that character is not an inherited property. Lovell (1973: 209) explains that we only inherit "a central nervous system, a cerebral mechanism, a glandular system, and organic drives of different strength" which are constantly and appropriately refined to respond to environmental stimuli and learning.

Character Development In Children

All the processes identified above come along with maturation. It is said that the human baby, at birth, is plunged into a seemingly hostile environment that seems to shatter its hitherto peaceful state of equilibrium, where it had been fed automatically, warmed and kept free from impurities and damage. Through maturation, the child is progressively brought to a state of preparedness for learned behaviour. Thus, these functions gradually become the responsibility of the child, who upon passing the stage of infancy, is forced to come to terms with the realities of his new environment. With time, he begins to gain control of his limbs, gradually acquiring the ability to crawl and walk in addition to grasping and manipulating things with his hands. The baby eventually grows into the child who is capable of riding a bicycle or manipulating a pen with accuracy (Stones, 1966: 33). As stated earlier, any development of character is primarily dependent on these psycho-physiological advances (in the growth and development of all the human bodily organs). This is most graphically realised at the period of adolescence, between the ages of 12 and 19 years.

Adolescence has been identified by psychologists as the period of transition between childhood and adult life. Hadfield (1962: 180) explains that

> . . . . when we speak if the adolescent as 'growing up', we mean that the youth is leaving behind the phase of protective childhood and is becoming independent, capable of going out to fend for himself.

It, therefore, forms the watershed of an individual's development of character as he begins to carve out an identity for himself and consciously assume new roles in the familial, and the wider social structure. At this point, the realities of life appear to the child with more graphic details but at this stage too, he is said to be developing his conscience; what Sigmund Freud calls the "Super Ego". This may also be tallied with Erickson's psyco-social phase of *Identity and Role Confusion*.

With their radical bodily changes and the consequence of many years of slow growth, adolescents often feel cut off from their previously dependable past (Seifert, 1991: 81 – 82). As such, it is said that they no longer readily submit without question to authority, even of their parents. They often claim the right to their own judgment and their choice of books, clothes, amusements, and particularly their choice of friends. This development relates to the Freudian concept of the *Ego Ideal*. It thus becomes obvious that they form around the peer group as they begin to realise common values, interest, and achievements. This has overt consequence on the development of the child's identity and hence, his character.

Two basic implications emerge in this regard: Firstly, the incorporation of the *Ego Ideal* obviously forms a duality in the personality. On the one side, there is the Ego or natural self with its innate impulse and desires while on the other hand, there is the *Ego Ideal* or moral self which the child has got by identification with the personalities of other people and incorporated into his personality. The second result relates to the emergence of self-consciousness this takes place at a stage shortly before adolescence. The self-conscious child assumes the ability to feel guilty, to shuffle about, to wonder about his dress, or about himself generally. This thus enables him to see himself as others see him, to observe his behaviour and match it against what he should be, and what others desire him to be. On the moral plane, it sets up within the child conscious standards and ideals for him to follow and live up to.

Neuroticism: Its Implications On Character Development Of Children

Unfortunately, there are many youths who, because of insecurity in childhood, shrink from taking on responsibility and many others who, because they were their mother's pampered kids, remain childish, and later expect their wives to do everything for them. Many girls, instead of taking responsibilities of motherhood, still cling to their childish desire to attract attention to themselves. Because they never grew up, they are incapable of facing the responsibilities of life, and thus become socially dislocated, living in a world of unreality and escaping into ultimate neurosis. Kay (1970) had sought to explain the dilemma of the adolescent when he speaks of the child contending with a fight on a double front. Not only has he to cope with the problems and difficulties of objective life and preserve himself from external dangers, but he is now confronted with

dangers from within, from his own impulses. The child is the unhappy battle – ground of all these conflicting forces. It does not make things easier for the parent to scold him for his failure in this difficult task. Any mishandling of this volatile stages is most likely to lapse the child into severe neurosis in the immediate adult life.

According to Child (1981: 247) "Neurosis" was first used to describe a collection of abnormal mental conditions including anxiety, obsessions and hysteria". This results, most particularly, from the failure of the adult population to stream-line and appropriately socialise the in-born drives of the child. Fontona (1981), observed that if this is done with understanding and due regards to the strength of these drives, then all goes well. But if the child meets with frustration and harsh punishments, then he will grow up full of guilt and inner conflicts, and with all the neurotic problems. Neurosis, in Freud's view, is essentially the result of preventing people from doing what they are strongly motivated to do, without allowing them to understand the reasons for this prohibition and without providing them with alternatives into which they can channel their frustrated psychological energy. This, of course, leads to maladjustment where character of the individual falls out of tune with the conventions or accepted norms of the particular people and circumstances of his environment. The maladjusted child, the neurotic, more frequently attempts goals not acceptable to the society.

Hadfield (1962: 19) observed further, with particular reference to the adolescent, that neurotic disorders originate from the repression of natural instinctual tendencies like sex and aggressiveness, which being repressed, come out in the perverted form of morbid or neurotic disorders. It is characterised by dissociation of consciousness, a part of the mind being split off from the rest. This dissociation may be produced by shock or by a sufficient quantity of psychological stress over a sufficiently long period. But most commonly, as Sigmund Freud maintained, it is due to "Repression". One represses what is distasteful to him/her and what is incompatible with the rest of his/her personality. The repressed and split off part then forms what Freud calls a "Complex". But though repressed, the complex is still active and may emerge in the form of neurotic symptoms, like a hysterical paralysis, or a phobia like claustrophobia, or an obsessional compulsion to touch every lamp-post, which are beyond the control of the will of the individual. The will has no authority whatsoever, over dissociate complexes. It is, therefore, useless to tell a child who has a phobia for school to read hard for his exams. He may not actually be oblivious of the gains derived from studious work, but it really doesn't matter to them. He is already a frustrated organism (Hadfield, 1962).

Lovell (1973: 267) explains that the child will respond in multiple ways towards the frustrating circumstances. This may include aggression, psychosomatic disturbance, compensation, rationalism, withdrawal, and regression. With the aggressive response, the child tries to attack, physically

and/or verbally, the person(s) or object(s) linked with the frustrating situation. The aggression may even be turned in upon himself, as in anxiety and guilt feelings, or directed toward a person or group distantly connected with the situation. At times, the child withdraws physically from the situation and overtly becomes apathetic about the goal, or else he withdraws from the situation psychologically through fantasy. With "regression", the child reverts to a more infantile form of behaviour. Thus he may lose motor or language skills that have been acquired, or throw up tantrums. With "rationalism", the child puts the blame for his failure on to some other person(s), or object(s), or else says that the goal is not longer worth attaining. "Compensation", on the other hand, may take many forms varying from compensatory day – dreaming to exhibitionism of many kinds. Finally, "psychosomatic disturbance" involves the development of some physical pathological conditions like asthma, diarrhoea, or even enuresis through which the child is able to withdraw from the persistently frustrating situation with a rationalised excuse (of being, ill).

These also find graphic expression under many symptomatic traits in the character of the neurotic child. These include; destructive tendencies towards people and things, extreme restlessness, constant day – dreaming, feelings of inferiority, stubbornness, abnormal fear of the dark, over-sensitivity to criticism and suggestions, inability to work hard at anything, inability to make decisions, tendency to bully other children, easily excited, frequent emotional upsets and marked solitariness. Others are, lying and cheating, excessive sulking or panting, achievement below chronological age, feelings of great importance, repeated truancy at home and at school, bed-wetting, thumb-sucking, finger-nail biting, facial tics and/or grimaces, nervous finger movements and hand writing, talking to oneself, and obstinate constipation. In any particular instance, a combination of three or four of the above character traits is enough to establish an individual as a neurotic.

As earlier mentioned, some of these neurotic traits may be the result of the Freudian concept of *Fixation*, the failure or the inability to progress from one "psycho-sexual stage" to another. These stages, as posited by Sigmund Freud include the Oral stage (0 – 1 yrs); the Anal stage (1 – 3 yrs); the Phallic stage (4 – 6 yrs); the Latency stage (6 yrs – puberty); and the Genital stage (Puberty to adulthood) (Olaidele, 2004). Freud holds that the more strongly fixated an individual is at any given stage, the more likely the person will want to display behaviour typical of that stage. He thus will regress to that stage when under stress. For instance, fixation at the anal stage results in over – eating or chain smoking in adult life. Anal fixation manifests in an abnormally tight control behaviour or very loose, disorderly behaviour, while fixation at the Phallic stage may result in aggression and various sex deviation (aversions) (Lovell, 1973).

However, Hadfield (1962: 253) maintains that the basic cause of neurotic disorders is the sense of insecurity. This emerges from the deprivation of

protective love for the child by the mother. Deprived or protective love, the child has no security and no confidence to face life; he is timid, anxious, and apprehensive. Deprived of protective love, he is afraid to venture and to give expression to those activities which will enable him to cope with life; he is absorbed in self-love, having been unable to love others and incapable of joining in that communal life by means of which alone he can get full scope for the development of his personality. Consequently, he is deprived of the means of developing stable aims and ideals in life. Kay (1970) also observed that a child, feeling left out and unloved, gets into a state of anxiety or fear; or may get into a state of general depression. In another instance, feeling the lack of love, the child may resort to masturbation as a solace. A child, a little older in the self-willed period, who feels left out perhaps because of the arrival of another baby, gets angry, aggressive, and jealous. Such a child may lapse into self-pity and feign illness of some sort just to attract attention or sympathy. He is a potential hysteric who wants sympathy not because he is sick, but who is sick because he is in dire need of sympathy and attention. For the adolescent, who has a greater degree of independence, the feeling of insecurity may be more tempestuous. He may become rebellious, anti-social, defiant or even develop into a delinquent.

Conclusion

From the foregone exposition, the antidote or panacea against neuroticism stands out most vividly. The seeming emphasis on protective love provides an obvious answer. Psychologists (Freud, Eysenck, Cattell, Kelly, Lovell, Child, Kay, Piaget, etc) are unanimous to the effect that a proper character development in children will of necessity require adult protection and love. It is seen as the child's primal need, occasioned by his helplessness and as provided for in the maternal instinct. Given protective love, the child has confidence to face life and is free to experiment and venture, or explore in an atmosphere of security. This eases his process of adaptation to life. Again, with protective love, the child responds with love for others, grows up to be sociable, and is happy in his married life. Furthermore, with such love, he easily identifies with those he loves and so takes over stable standards and ideals which stand as his guide through life. These are generally summed up in the reference to "right parenthood". This term simply re-echoes our earlier understanding that the human child, at birth, possessed some primitive, chaotic instincts that requires the good parent to identify and coordinate. Such processes of coordination, thus, exclude acts of aggressive repression of these instincts or over-indulgence in any one psycho-sexual stage as this may result in regression or fixation as the case may be.

However, granted that human beings do not relate only to their parents, as is the case with infants, the problems of character development in the children as they grow up proceeds from the parent to other members of the community. This explains the relative emphasis on the child who is seen to relate so much with his

peers and teachers in school, and is resultantly exposed to life with greater truth and details than the immediate home can provide. Therefore, the teacher, like the parent, will need to understand the characteristics of normal children and watch out for early signs of maladjustments. For instance, he may need to be on the look out for children who are excessively lazy, aggressive, anxious, living in fantasy, or without companions. Again, like all adults charged with developing and preserving mental health (good character) in children, the teacher must avoid being aggressive in the classroom. The attitude required here is a combination of firmness and friendliness. This is avoiding all forms of irritation. Gang activities among children as they grow up should also be monitored and redirected towards productive and healthy ends. Finally, a child that is already a neurotic should be referred to an appropriate child guidance clinic or a psycho-therapist.

Bibliography

Child, D. (1981: *Psychology and the Teacher* (3rd Ed.), London: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Fontana, D. (1988): *Psychology for Teachers* (2nd Ed.), London: Macmillan Publishers, Ltd.

Gabriel, J. (1974): *Children Growing Up*, London: University of London Press, Ltd.

Hadfield, (1962): *Childhood and Adolescence*, London: Pengum Books, Ltd.

Kay, W. (1968): *Moral Development*, London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd.

Kay, W. (1975): *Moral Education*, London: George Allen and Unwin, Ltd.

Lovell, K. (1973): *Educational Psychology and Children*, (11th Ed.), London: University of London Press.

Maslow, A.H. (1970): *Motivation and Personality* (2nd Ed.), New York: Harper and Row Publishers.

Seifert, K.L. (1991): *Educational Psychology* (2nd Ed.), Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Stones, E. (1966): *An Introduction to Educational Psychology*, Ibadan: Spectrum Books, Limited.

Wadsworth, B.J. (1989): *Piaget's Theory of Cognitive and Affective Development* (4th Ed.), London: Longman.

Oladele, J.O. (2004): *Fundamentals of Educational Psychology*, Lagos: Johns-lad Publishers Ltd.

Owuamanam, D.O.P. and Owuamanam, T.O. (2002): *Fundamentals of Educational Psychology*, Lagos: Bolabay Publications.

Maitafsir, M.G. (2005): *Child Development and Learning in Psychology* (2nd ed.), Sokoto: Buga Educational Services.