

Topic 3.1

Themes and Methods in Developmental Psychology

3.1.01 Enduring Themes Inform Developmental Psychology

[3.2.A.1]

Developmental psychology has identified several themes through which the lifespan can be examined. These themes include:

1. **Stability and change:** Development can be viewed in terms of which aspects of an individual change over time in comparison to those that are relatively unchanging. A developmental psychologist may investigate, for example, which cognitive abilities increase during adulthood as compared with those that remain stable.
2. **Nature and nurture:** As Sub-Topic 1.1.01 introduces, development is influenced by heredity, sometimes referred to as nature, and the environment, sometimes referred to as nurture. Developmental psychologists may examine the relative contributions of heredity and the environment in a particular behavior or trait, such as investigating if genes or upbringing contribute more to intelligence.
3. **Continuous and discontinuous:** Development can be described as occurring continuously or during discontinuous, discrete stages. For example, some developmental psychologists have stated that a child's cognitive development occurs in stages while others view it as one gradual process.

3.1.02 Cross-Sectional and Longitudinal Research Design Methods in Developmental Psychology

[3.2.B]

Research study designs used in developmental psychology include cross-sectional and longitudinal studies.

Cross-sectional studies gather data at one point in time, allowing for the comparison of individuals across different ages. For example, a researcher surveys individuals of varying ages about their depressive symptoms during a global pandemic, then compares the level of depression in different age groups.

In contrast, **longitudinal studies** collect data with the same participants at several time points, which can reveal how or if variables change over time. For example, a researcher surveys many couples about their happiness while their children are living at home, immediately after the children move out, and then several years later to determine how parents' happiness changes over time (Figure 3.1).

For example, a researcher surveys many sets of parents at three different timepoints.



Figure 3.1 Longitudinal research example.

Because they require multiple instances of data collection, longitudinal studies are often more expensive than shorter-term studies (eg, cross-sectional research); another disadvantage is that participants may drop out during the study.

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Check for Understanding Quiz

1. In developmental psychology, a cross-sectional research study
 - A. gathers data at one point in time
 - B. collects data with the same participants at several time points
 - C. does not allow for the comparison of individuals across different ages
 - D. best examines how variables change over time

2. The idea that development can be viewed as occurring in discrete stages or as one gradual process best reflects which theme in developmental psychology?
 - A. Stability and change
 - B. Nature and nurture
 - C. Continuous and discontinuous
 - D. Cross-sectional and longitudinal

Note: Answers to this quiz are in the back of the book (appendix).