The Current Status of the Theory of Structural Cognitive Modifiability in Relation to Theories of Intelligence

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Abstract

This articles discusses Feuerstein's place among theorists of intelligence and intellectual development and the pervasive influence his work has had.

Keywords

theories of intelligence, theories of intellectual development, Feuerstein, structural cognitive modifiability

I count myself as among the fortunate that I had the opportunity to get to know Reuven Feuerstein and even to count him as a friend. Although we had not run into each other in recent years, during the 1980s, we frequently ran into each other at conferences and in various meetings in Israel. Perhaps the high point of our interaction was when we debated each other in Alberta, Canada. It was a friendly debate and one in which we struggled to find points on which we disagreed. There just were not so many!

Among contemporary theories of intelligence and of intellectual modifiability, Feuerstein's is unique in having closely associated with it both an assessment (the Learning Potential Assessment Device—LPAD) and a cognitive-training program (Instrumental Enrichment—IE, also called FIE in recognition of its creator, Feuerstein). The theory thus is, in a sense, ahead of all the others in the readiness with which it can both be used and applied in psychological and educational practice.

As I write this short article, I have two books in front of me—Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik, and Rand (2002) and Feuerstein, Feuerstein, Falik, and Rand (2006). Both are revisions of earlier work (Feuerstein, 1979, 1980). They are the key works of Feuerstein, I believe, representing respectively his work

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on the dynamic assessment of learning potential and the enrichment of cognitive functioning. Had Feuerstein produced these two books and nothing more, he still would have found a major place in the pantheon of the great psychologists of all time. Of course, Feuerstein produced far more than just these two books.

To my own way of thinking, there are four "big" current theories of intelligence: Carroll's (1993), which really incorporates virtually all psychometric theories; Gardner's (1983, 1993) theory of multiple intelligences; my own triarchic theory of successful intelligence (Sternberg, 1985, 1997); and, of course, Feuerstein's (2002, 2006) theory of cognitive modifiability. Feuerstein's theory, as mentioned above, is the most comprehensive, because of its ready application. Carroll's theory, representing psychometric theory in general, has had by far the lion's share of attention in the world of education. And Gardner's theory probably has generated the most excitement among educators in my own country, the United States. Among the four theories, Feuerstein's is most closely related to my own theory, in that both theories emphasize (a) the importance of basic cognitive and metacognitive processes underlying human intelligence, (b) the modifiability of intelligence, and (c) the importance of dynamic assessment (see also Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2002).

The three most prominent theories of intellectual development of all time, I believe, are Feuerstein's (2002, 2006) theory, Piaget's (1952, 1972) theory, and Vygotsky's (1962, 1978) theory. Feuerstein is closer to Piaget in his detailed analysis of cognitive structures, but closer to Vygotsky in his ingenious development of dynamic assessment—a development, I gather, which they both achieved relatively independently. In my view, Feuerstein, Piaget, and Vygotsky, perhaps with the addition of Luria (1973, 1976), stand alone among theorists of cognitive development in the scope and power of their thinking. Feuerstein is unique in belonging both to the first group of contemporary intelligence theorists and to the second group of historically distinguished theorists of intellectual development.

The obvious question one might ask is whether Feuerstein's theory and the instruments that came with it are "forever": Are they still as fresh and powerful as they were when they were first introduced in the mid-twentieth-century? Fortunately, the answer to this question is "no." I say, "fortunately", because theories and instruments that stay around forever are not truly scientific—either because they have failed to generate research or because they

have failed to generate any interest at all. As I have said to my own students, the best they can do is not to become my acolytes, but rather, to become the developers of the theories, research, and instruments that supersede mine.

Two of the greatest minds of all times in the field of astronomy were Galileo and Copernicus, but imagine if astronomy had never moved beyond their observations, or physics beyond Newton's. Science is different from the humanities in a key respect: Great works in the humanities take their place in an eternal pantheon, where only the interpretations change, whereas great works in the sciences are part of an eternal process of development and change. The greatest compliment, as, say in the work of Skinner, is when someone can work in a field and not even have to cite you because your work has become so fundamental to the field that it is fully incorporated into it. Not everyone who draws on Feuerstein's ideas cites him any more, because his ideas have so much become the fabric of the way we think about cognitive processing.

It is one of the great honors of my life that I got to know Reuven Feuerstein just a little, and perhaps if I am extremely lucky, I will become reacquainted with him in another, and I hope better, world!

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