

## [“The Emergence of Developmental Psychopathology” \(1984\), by Dante Cicchetti](#) [1]

By: Ali, Hira Keywords: [Developmental Psychopathology](#) [2]

In 1984, Dante Cicchetti published “The Emergence of Developmental Psychopathology,” an article in which he argued that the previously amorphous study of developmental psychopathology was emerging as a unified discipline. According to Cicchetti, developmental psychopathology describes an interdisciplinary field that studies abnormalities in psychological function that can arise during human development. Such studies include research about the effects that traumatic experiences may have on the development of psychological disorders and about what behaviors are considered normal or abnormal at different ages. In the article, Cicchetti reports about the origins of developmental psychopathology, why it emerged as its own discipline, and why researchers should study it. In addition to recognizing the field of developmental psychopathology, the article informed later research about preventing and treating the harmful psychological effects of early traumatic events.

Cicchetti, who was an associate professor at [Harvard University](#) [3] in Cambridge, Massachusetts, wrote “The Emergence of Developmental Psychopathology” as a guest editorial for a special 1984 issue of *Child Development*. Before that, Cicchetti had researched child development and the development of mental disorders. According to Cicchetti, special issues in *Child Development* were special because they consolidated existing scientific fields and they introduced the emergence of new ones. Cicchetti claimed that he was motivated to write his editorial to foster collaboration and further research in the emerging field of developmental psychopathology.

Developmental psychopathology, according to Cicchetti, is an interdisciplinary field that studies distortions, disturbances, and degenerations of normal psychological functions as processes or mechanisms in a person as they develop over time. In other words, it studies how and why some people develop psychological disorders over the course of their lifetimes. Researchers focus on at risk children, such as those that have been maltreated or have developmental disorders that occur over a lifespan. Studying those children enables researchers to differentiate between behavior that is normal in an individual from behavior that is maladaptive, or prevents recovery.

In the introduction, Cicchetti describes the alleged benefits of classifying certain areas of research as an individual, unique discipline. Cicchetti states that the existence of an academic discipline or field requires a focus of study, a base of research, and experts to guide that research. Cicchetti states that by combining certain areas of research into a unified discipline, that field begins to have its own history, integrity, and program. “The Emergence of Developmental Psychopathology” is an introduction to developmental psychopathology, in which Cicchetti defines the research, theories, methodologies, and models that form the foundations of the interdisciplinary field. He argues that those foundations validate it as a field distinct from other fields of psychology. Cicchetti organizes the article by defining and explaining what he calls the historical roots, or other scientific disciplines that shaped the foundations, theories, methods, research, and models of developmental psychopathology.

After that introduction, Cicchetti argues that developmental psychology was the first historical root of developmental psychopathology. Cicchetti argues that developmental psychology helped inform researchers’ understanding of abnormal functioning, which is the focus of study in developmental psychopathology. Developmental psychology is the study of how and why [humans](#) [4] change and grow emotionally, behaviorally, and intellectually from infancy to old age. According to Cicchetti, researchers in developmental psychology do not treat abnormal functioning as separate from normal functioning. Rather, researchers study abnormal functioning as normal behavior gone awry. Conversely, by studying abnormal and harmful behavior, researchers can define and understand normal and healthy behavior. Developmental psychology also enables researchers to study abnormal function with a causal and temporal perspective. In other words, harmful psychological behavior is explained by the influence of external factors and as a process over time.

Next, Cicchetti describes the influence of neurophysiology and [embryology](#) [5] on developmental psychopathology. According to Cicchetti, those two disciplines provided exemplary models to study abnormal psychological function. Neurophysiology is the study of the function of the nervous system, including the brain and how it connects to the actions and sensations of the whole body. Embryologists study the development of sex cells and prenatal [humans](#) [4]. Cicchetti explains that in neurophysiology, studies of how the nervous system recovers from damage had enabled researchers to better understand its normal functioning. Similarly, studies of pathological, or abnormal, embryos have helped embryologists better understand normal embryo

development. Those studies provided researchers in developmental psychopathology with replicable models useful for studying abnormal psychological functioning from a developmental perspective, such as examining how individuals recover from mental disorders.

Next, Cicchetti discusses the historical role that medical pathology, clinical psychology, and psychiatry has had on the establishment of developmental psychopathology. He argues that those disciplines, heavily influenced by medical pathology, have presented methods to study and diagnose abnormal psychological functioning, such as mental disorders. Clinical psychology and psychiatry assess and treat mental, emotional, and behavioral disorders and disabilities. According to Cicchetti, clinical psychologists drew upon the medical pathology model that examined pathology, or abnormal functioning, as the effect of a single cause. They combined the model with Freudian psychology, which focuses on the emotional conflict between unconscious desires and social mores. Thus, Cicchetti argues, emotional conflict becomes the single cause that leads to unhealthy psychological behavior. In that manner, the role of emotion was emphasized above that of cognition and became one method of studying abnormal functioning in developmental psychopathology.

Cicchetti contrasts the next historical root, academic psychology, to clinical psychology. In so doing, he introduces a different method to study and diagnose abnormal psychological functioning. Cicchetti argues that unlike clinical psychologists, who focus on abnormal function as an effect caused by internal factors, academic psychologists study physical behaviors as processes determined by external factors. According to Cicchetti, academic psychologists rely on experiments to theorize about normal human functioning. Accordingly, academic psychology emphasizes the role of cognition and behavior more than that of emotions. That perspective presents a different methodology for studying mental disorders and disabilities in developmental psychopathology.

Cicchetti continues to compare and contrast the contributions of clinical psychology and academic psychology in his article. He explains that there are two key discrepancies between the two fields. First, they differ in their methodologies. Second, they differ in the emphasis they place on development. Cicchetti highlights those differences, beginning with academic psychology. He explains that academic psychology was developed in academic institutions and relies on replicable and proven data as opposed to theoretical concepts. Consequently, its research methods rely solely on experimentation. Accordingly, academic psychologists conduct research in a laboratory setting, in which they can manipulate variables that could impact the patient. On the other hand, clinical psychology, a product of clinical practices and experience, relies on research methods that are more observational in nature, such as case studies and interviews. Case studies examine a person or a group of interest over a period of time. Thus, clinical psychologists conduct research in a naturalistic setting in which the psychologists do not manipulate variables that might affect the patients.

Cicchetti emphasizes how polarized the two fields were and why their research methods were later improved by collaboration. He explains that the polarization arose from the merits of each discipline's research methodology. According to Cicchetti, academic psychologists underestimated the practical application of observations made in uncontrolled settings they found neither scientifically rigorous nor scholarly. To them, the naturalistic setting left much to chance and the observations and interviews provided a subjective view of abnormal functioning. Cicchetti argues clinical psychologists underestimated academic research, which they found impractical in a clinical setting. To them, the laboratory setting did not account for the human perspective and was disconnected from the world in which abnormal functioning arose to be applicable to patients. For that reason, academic psychology rarely studied pathology, abnormal functioning, and clinical psychology rarely made use of a developmental perspective.

However, as Cicchetti explains, by the 1970s, significant collaboration and acknowledgement of the necessity of interdisciplinary work marked the beginning of developmental psychopathology. It was the collaboration amongst the fields of developmental psychology, academic psychology, psychiatry, and clinical psychology that was the first step towards developmental psychopathology emerging as its own discipline. Clinical and academic psychologists began to realize the necessity of both emotion and cognition in understanding how harmful psychological behavior arose. They also had realized the importance of relating research in the lab to what was encountered in the clinic. That collaboration amongst disciplines also promoted collaboration within the field of developmental psychology. Thus, researchers began to study harmful psychological function with a focus on childhood development over long periods of time.

According to Cicchetti, that reformed perspective enabled researchers to broaden their understanding of psychological pathology. Consequently, researchers began publishing papers that incorporated the fields of developmental psychology, academic psychology, and clinical psychology in addition to the other fields Cicchetti mentions. Cicchetti argues that it was the interdisciplinary perspective that marked the development of a new discipline focused on understanding abnormal psychological functioning from a developmental perspective. Therefore, that collective of research provided the necessary foundation for developmental psychopathology to emerge.

However, Cicchetti argues what truly launched the field of developmental psychopathology was its last root, or the field [ethology](#)<sup>[6]</sup>. According to Cicchetti, [ethology](#)<sup>[6]</sup> gave developmental psychopathology its structure and character. Ethology mirrors developmental psychopathology in that it is a multidisciplinary field that utilizes developmental frameworks and techniques to study abnormal animal behavior. The collaboration of scientists from multiple disciplines to study behavioral pathology in animals mirrored the goals of scientists interested in abnormal behavior in [humans](#)<sup>[4]</sup>. According to the author, the structure of [ethology](#)<sup>[6]</sup> helped developmental psychopathology consolidate its roots into a distinct discipline with its own history, integrity, and program.

The author concludes the article by recognizing notable researchers in the field of developmental psychopathology and by briefly summarizing his work on the 1984 issue of *Child Development*. The author identifies those researchers as pioneers in the field of developmental psychopathology, whose contributions range from classifying childhood pathology to studying comparisons between general and individual development to maladaptation to the study of behavioral disorders. As for his own contributions, Cicchetti expounds on how he served on the editorial team to solicit, select, and review articles before publishing them in *Child Development*.

Through the publication of "The Emergence of Developmental Psychopathology," Cicchetti established developmental psychopathology as a distinct discipline. The article has been cited more than 700 times. It has contributed to articles on resilience, the ability to overcome harmful experiences, biology of stress following traumatic experiences, long-term studies on mental disorders, and the understanding of other disorders such as autism. Although work on concepts in developmental psychopathology had existed before the publication of "The Emergence of Developmental Psychopathology," some researchers in the field argue that Cicchetti's article best articulated the emergence of the discipline. Developmental psychopathology has influenced prevention, intervention, and research practices aimed at treating children with behavioral and cognitive difficulties. Since the publication of Cicchetti's article, the field has seen an increase in collaboration and research specifically focused on pathology from a developmental perspective.

## Sources

1. Cicchetti, Dante. "The Emergence of Developmental Psychopathology." *Child Development* (1984): 1–7.
2. Rutter, Michael, and L. Alan Sroufe. "Developmental psychopathology: Concepts and challenges." *Development and psychopathology* 12 (2000): 265–96. <http://europepmc.org/abstract/med/11014739><sup>[7]</sup> (Accessed September 19, 2017).

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