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Ross A. Thompson is a developmental psychologist in the Department of Psychology at the University of California, Davis. His research concerns the influence of early parent-child relationships on social-emotional growth, the development of emotion regulation, and the growth of prosocial and moral motivation in the early years. He is also concerned with the applications of developmental science to public policy problems, and has written about the prevention of child maltreatment, child custody after parents divorce, early childhood mental health, early learning and school readiness, research ethics, and grandparent visitation rights.

Education and Professional Development

Thompson was born on August 5, 1954 in Madison, Wisconsin and grew up in Wisconsin and California. He earned his B.A. in Psychology from Occidental College in Los Angeles in 1976, where his initial interests in law and public policy shifted to psychology. After graduation, he went to the University of Michigan to study moral

development and empathy with Martin Hoffman on an NSF Graduate Fellowship. With Hoffman's departure from Michigan in 1977, Thompson worked with Michael Lamb when he came to Michigan in 1978 until Lamb's departure in 1980. During graduate study, Thompson affiliated with the Bush Program in Child Development and Social Policy at Michigan, one of a small consortium of university-based graduate training programs to prepare Ph.D. developmental scientists to contribute to public policy. He also worked at the Child Development Project, a pioneering clinical and research unit focused on understanding and treating very early mental health problems under the leadership of Selma Fraiberg. These experiences proved to have longstanding influences on Thompson's career. He was awarded a Ph.D. in developmental psychology in 1981.

Academic Career

Thompson joined the faculty of the Department of Psychology at the University of Nebraska in 1981, which remained his professional home until he moved to the University of California in 2003. While at Nebraska, he created the graduate program in developmental psychology and was a core faculty member of the Law-Psychology Program, was Associate Director of the Center on Children, Families, and the Law, and had an appointment at the College of Law, where he taught a course on children and the law. He was a

visiting scientist at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development and Education in (West) Berlin in 1985, studying life-span developmental psychology with Paul Baltes. A sabbatical leave in 1989–1990 brought him to Stanford, where joint visiting appointments in the Department of Psychology and the School of Law as an NIMH Fellow in Law and Psychology provided further opportunities to develop integrative ideas bridging developmental psychology and family policy. Thompson received university-wide research and teaching awards while at Nebraska, and was appointed Carl A. Happold Distinguished Professor of Psychology in 2000.

He moved to UC Davis to help build its graduate program in developmental psychology. While at Davis, Thompson established the Social and Emotional Development Lab, contributed to the creation of the university's Center for Poverty Research, was a founding member of the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, and assumed leadership roles in ZERO TO THREE, a national nonprofit devoted to the healthy development of young children and their families, beginning his term as President of the Board of Directors in 2015. He received the Ann L. Brown Award for Excellence in Developmental Research in 2007, a university-wide award for public service, and was appointed Distinguished Professor of Psychology in 2011.

Thompson has published five books, several best-selling textbooks, and over 250 papers related to his work. He has twice served as Associate Editor of *Child Development*, the flagship journal of the Society for Research in Child Development, and has been guest editor of several other research journals. He has received several distinguished lectureships, and has keynoted at research and professional conferences, testified before Congressional and state legislative committees, and presented at nonprofit boards and business groups.

Research Interests

Thompson's work in early personality and social-emotional development is integrative, reflecting

his thinking about developmental science generally:

Developmental science has a longstanding (perhaps necessary) habit of parceling the developing child. Yet building bridges between different orientations to the developmental process has always proven fruitful. Developmental science is on the verge of resolving some of its past conceptual pitfalls and moving toward a biologically dynamic, experience-based understanding of development integrating developing biology, representation, behavior, and relationships. (Thompson 2015, p. 239)

Early Attachment and Its Developmental Significance

His research program has drawn significantly on attachment theory because of the opportunities it provides for this kind of multilevel, integrative thinking. Thompson's dissertation was one of the first studies to document the changes that occur in the security of attachment owing to changing family circumstances and the renegotiation of parent-infant relationships that can result. This experience-based adaptability contrasts with the view, prevalent at the time, that the security of attachment remains consistent once it develops and has formative influences for this reason. Thompson's findings contributed to a broader view (discussed in a 1985 book entitled *Infant-Mother Attachment* that he coauthored with Michael Lamb and others) that the security of attachment is important primarily as a foundation for the continuing quality of the parent-child relationship that, over time, contributes to the child's social and personality characteristics. Research since then has confirmed this view. Attachment security in infancy, taken alone, is not a strong predictor of later developmental outcomes. But when it is considered along with the continuing quality of parent-child interaction and other social influences on the child, these collective and compounding influences together are major contributors to social and personality development.

Attachment research in Thompson's lab has focused on its social-cognitive correlates that reflect, in his view, the functioning of "internal working models," that is, the representations of self, others, and relationships that derive from

secure or insecure attachments. Thompson and his students (including Deborah Laible and Abbie Raikes) have examined the association of attachment security with young children's emotion understanding, self-concept, conscience development, and other social-cognitive outcomes that reflect developing understanding of self, others, and relationships. This research effort reflects his view of the nature of these mental working models and their development. By contrast with alternative portrayals of internal working models within attachment theory that emphasize their implicit functioning as unconscious defensive mechanisms or the prelinguistic cognitive-perceptual processes of infancy, Thompson's view links the development of internal working models to the advances in explicit social-emotional understanding that occur during the early years. He and his students have shown that securely attached young children are more advanced in understanding others' emotions, show greater social problem-solving skills, are less likely to exhibit a negative social attribution bias, endorse more competent strategies for managing their emotions, are more advanced in conscience development, and report more positive views of themselves and exhibit greater self-confidence compared to insecurely attached children. These findings are consistent with the characteristics of internal working models and the constructive outcomes of secure attachment proposed by attachment theory.

Furthermore, Thompson and his students have tried to understand what happens in secure and insecure parent-child relationships that contribute to these social-cognitive outcomes. They have focused particular attention on the quality and content of early mother-child conversations because of the opportunities they provide the mother to clarify, interpret, and expand on the young child's direct experience through the influence of language. These conversations are important, he believes, because they offer the child insight into the internal motivators of people's behavior, such as emotions, motivations, and social affiliations. With respect to emotion understanding, for example, he and his students have found that mothers in secure relationships with their children perceive more sensitively and

interpret more accurately what their children are feeling, they better validate the child's experience, and they discuss experiences involving emotion in a more richly informative, elaborative manner. Mothers in secure relationships also engage in greater coaching of emotion regulation with their young children. Thompson and his students interpret these findings as showing that mothers in secure relationships are not just promoting greater social-cognitive understanding, but they are also providing a "psychological secure base" that promotes the child's own exploration and reflection on emotions, relationships, and the self, even when feelings are disturbing or relationships are troubled. This is, they argue, one of the purposes of attachment relationships as children move from infancy to the preschool years and as representations of experience become more complex and important to social-emotional competence.

Development of Emotion Regulation

A second research focus of Thompson and his students has been the development of emotion regulation in children. This area of research also reflects the multilevel, integrative approach of his work. Thompson has enlisted developmental systems theory to argue that emotion regulation develops from the continuous, mutual interaction among neurobiological and behavioral systems associated with emotion in the contexts in which emotions occur. Precise distinctions between emotion and emotion regulation are difficult, he believes, because of how regulatory influences are incorporated into emotion elicitation and development. Furthermore, by contrast with longstanding views that emotion regulation derives from "top-down" inhibitory control (such as prefrontal regulation of limbic structures or the influence of cognitive regulation on emotional arousal), Thompson argues that emotion regulation also reflects "bottom-up" influences. This can be seen, for example, in children under stress who have developed lower thresholds of reactivity of limbic structures that are likely to color cognitive appraisals of threat and alter the child's self-regulatory capabilities.

In Thompson's functionalist approach, the context in which emotions are regulated is crucial.

Because emotion regulation strategies are enlisted to accomplish emotion goals (i.e., how one wants to feel), the context is important to defining those goals and how they can be achieved. A child who is threatened by a peer or adult may have to choose whether to manage emotions to enlist the assistance of others, or for self-defense, or to escape the situation, or to appease the aggressor, and these involve different strategies of emotion regulation suited to accomplish different emotion goals. Viewed in this manner, strategies of emotion regulation are rarely inherently optimal or dysfunctional, but are rather more or less adaptive in a particular context.

Thompson has applied this functionalist approach to emotion regulation to the challenges of children at risk for affective psychopathology. He has argued that contrary to their frequent characterization as emotionally underregulated, these children are often struggling to manage multiple or inconsistent emotional demands in contexts where there is often no optimal strategy of emotion regulation. Drawing on studies of children living in families with chronic marital conflict, who are temperamentally anxious, who are maltreated, and children who live with a depressed caregiver, Thompson has shown how their efforts to manage emotion in a context of intense, sometimes overwhelming, emotional demands result in strategies that may provide some immediate coping but create other longer-term problems (such as heightened emotional vulnerability) and may also be dysfunctional outside of these contexts. Aiding such children, Thompson argues, requires a more sensitive appraisal of their emotion goals in those contexts and the strategies that have developed to adapt to the emotional demands of their circumstances.

The developmental research that derives from these ideas underscores that: (a) emotion regulation in children can be extrinsic (by others, such as parents) or intrinsic (i.e., self-initiated); (b) it can target the management of positive as well as negative emotions and can include enhancing as well as inhibiting emotional arousal; (c) emotion regulation is often manifested in altered “emotional dynamics,” such as changes in the latency, persistence, recovery, or lability of emotional reactions

as well as their intensity; and (d) there are multiple components to the development of emotion regulation. These components include the developing ability of children to monitor their emotional responses and the consequences of their responses, to evaluate their suitability to a particular context, and to modify their emotions or their expression. In research with his students, Thompson has found that children develop more sophisticated understanding of the benefits of alternative emotion regulation strategies with increasing age, and that they recognize that emotion goals are different in different social contexts, such as with peers or adults. Other research has focused on how parents talk about emotion with their young children, and indicates that a mother’s beliefs about emotion in her own life – especially the importance of attending to and accepting her own feelings – are associated with her sensitivity to her child’s emotions.

Development of Constructive Social Motives

An overarching goal of Thompson’s research program has been to understand early influences that contribute to the development of a positive, constructive orientation toward other people. The development of secure attachments and warm parent-child relationships, acquiring greater emotion understanding and social problem-solving skills, achieving competence at emotion regulation, developing conscience and prosocial motivation, and related competencies can all be considered part of a developing human connection to other people that emerges in the early years. A personal connection to others’ feelings and well-being is a foundation for more constructive social behavior in the early years, he argues, and curbs the development of aggressive and violent behavior.

In studies of early prosocial motivation conducted in the Social and Emotional Development Lab, Thompson and his students have found that children develop reliable dispositions to help others very early. In studies with 18-month-olds as well as preschoolers, individual differences in prosocial motivation were consistent across different kinds of prosocial tasks (such as helping, sharing, and responding compassionately to

another's distress) and, in one study, were consistent over 1½ years: Children who were most helpful at age 4½ tended to be so at age 6. In accord with other findings in this program, moreover, these differences were related to the quality of the mother-child relationship. Toddlers who were the most prosocial, for example, had mothers who responded with greater sensitivity to them during play and more often referred to a story character's internal states (such as emotions) during storybook reading.

Contrary to traditional theories of moral development that emphasize the self-interested, egocentric motives of young children, Thompson argues from findings like these that moral awareness arises not primarily from the rewards and sanctions of adults, but rather from early achievements in the young child's understanding of people. These include the child's rapidly developing sensitivity to others' feelings and capacity for empathy, their awareness that people are motivated by desires and intentions and that others can affect whether these desires are fulfilled, and the young child's inclination to participate in advancing others' goals. These achievements constitute, in this view, a human connection with others' well-being, and provide young children with a "pre-moral sensibility" that underlies their intuitive sense of fairness and right and wrong. Parents who talk about others' feelings and needs and the effects of another's actions on them enlist this pre-moral sensibility in their moral socialization efforts. In studies of conscience development in preschoolers, for example, Thompson and Laible found that when mothers talked about people's feelings and needs in conversations about good and bad behavior, their preschool-age children were strongest in conscience development. By contrast, maternal references to rules and the consequences of breaking them were never associated with the growth of conscience. In this view, therefore, the child's pre-moral sensibility, developed from their sensitivity to others' emotions and goals, becomes enlisted into a moral framework as parents incorporate this human connection into a system of values.

Developmental Science and Public Policy

Thompson is not an applied developmental scientist, but throughout his career he has worked to bridge the ideas of developmental science with public policy. The reason is that many problems in child and family policy look different when a child's perspective is at the foreground, and doing so sometimes yields different policy options. During his years at Nebraska, Thompson worked on these issues in the context of his affiliation with the department's Law-Psychology Program and thus primarily concern problems in family law. His papers during this period concern, for example, the relevance of attachment theory to child custody determinations when parents divorce, grandparent visitation rights, the prevention of child maltreatment, and research ethics. Empirical policy-relevant research during this period included detailed studies (with Raikes) of mother-child interaction in families in poverty and determining abuse-prone parental attitudes in a large, nationally representative sample. After his move to California, Thompson's scope widened to include the impact of economic stress on children, early education and the determinants of school readiness, and early childhood mental health.

As one illustration of this approach, Thompson proposed a developmental approach to the analysis of research risk in which he argued that not all risks from children's participation in research decline with increasing age. Some increase as children mature (such as the potential for being humiliated or embarrassed by research disclosures, as well as threats from privacy intrusions), leading him to propose alternative ways of weighing risks and benefits to research participation. He has asked how would a child-oriented child protection system compare with current procedures for investigating and adjudicating suspected child maltreatment, how can social support be usefully enlisted to help children and families at risk of child abuse, and how does research in developmental neuroscience help educators and policymakers understand the behavioral effects of stress on early learning.

The effort to enlist developmental science into public policy has led to his working extensively with agencies and organizations outside of academe. Thompson has consulted for many years with the California Department of Education; served on the advisory boards of the National Institute for Early Education Research, Children Now, First 5 LA, and the Buffett Early Childhood Institute; has contributed to training early childhood educators; and has spoken to a wide variety of policy, business, and professional audiences.

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