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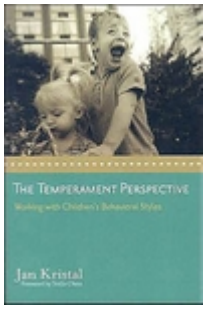
Temperament as an Essential Construct in Counseling

A review of



The Temperament Perspective:Working With Children's Behavioral Styles

by Jan Kristal

Baltimore: Brookes Publishing, 2005. 438 pp. ISBN 1-55766-791-8. $29.95, paperback

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It is not uncommon for therapists working with children to tell stories of children's drastic individual differences, more interesting when displayed among siblings. On the first day at a day care center, when one 3-year-old cheerfully joins peers' play, another still clings to the mother and avoids eye contact with any strangers; one 5-year-old easily accepts a teddy bear when her peer takes away her Barbie, while another screams and cries incessantly.

Jan Kristal's book, *The Temperament Perspective: Working With Children's Behavioral Styles,* provides a rich resource for professionals to understand and transform knowledge of temperament into practices of positive interaction with children. It aims to provide "an accessible way for professionals, clinicians, and parents to understand temperament and incorporate the concepts to enhance their work with children" (p. xiii). The author begins with temperament theories and issues of assessment. Chess and Thomas's

(1996) concept of “goodness of fit” is used as an overarching concept to illustrate the effects of temperament–environment interactions on social–emotional as well as intellectual development. The author delineates what temperament-related behavioral issues and problems could come up at different ages. She describes how children's temperament manifests itself in various settings, such as at home, day care, school, health care, and mental care settings, as well as how to help children with various temperament profiles handle different situations. The author uses clinical cases, useful tips, and important guidelines to provide succinct practical guidance to professionals to enhance their awareness and knowledge, as well as skills to work with children.

Reading the foreword by Stella Chess, one of the pioneers in temperament study, one cannot help but think about *Temperament Theory and Practice* by Chess and Thomas (1996). Through a summary of current temperament theory and practice, Kristal maintains the rigor and thoroughness seen in Chess and Thomas's pioneering work but enriches their work with a good source of clinical cases and extends their work to encompass a wide variety of situations in which temperament might have a role to play in children's functioning.

Chess and Thomas (1996) advocated the expansion of temperament as a factor in psychotherapy. They applied the concept of temperament in the practice of prevention and early intervention. Kristal further develops the application of temperament in clinical settings, and provides detailed information to make it more practical. Based on her rich clinical experiences, she offers recommendations for both parents and professionals working with families; in the appendixes, she offers an extensive list of temperament questionnaires, suggestions for further reading, and resources including Web sites and programs.

Situating Temperament in Social and Functional Contexts

The most attractive feature of this book is the breadth of its detailed clinical cases of children with varied presenting problems and illustrations of their application. The sheer number as well as a variety of temperament problems and perplexing topics the author presents, discusses, and addresses reflects her rich experience and expertise in dealing with children with various temperaments. The children portrayed in the book are no strangers to parents, teachers, caregivers, and mental health clinicians. They pose behavioral challenges such as aggressiveness, shyness, and noncompliance, as well as challenges regarding children's social adjustment, peer relationships, self-esteem issues, self-management skills, and mental health. The cases are used for a compelling reason: To understand temperament at work, one needs to situate temperament in social and functional contexts wherein it is expressed, and its functional meaning elucidated.

Application of the Goodness-of-Fit Model

The assumption of goodness of fit is predicated on the notion of match versus mismatch of environmental expectations and demands and temperamental dispositions as a determinant of the functional significance and valence of a specific temperament characteristic. To promote a goodness of fit, either the child or the child's environment has to be changed.

Because of individual differences in temperament or behavioral style, different children may react differently to the same environment. An analysis of the goodness of fit between a child's temperament and the environment in which a conflict occurs can assist with planning interventions to produce a better match. Guidance is provided to caregivers and other professionals in recognizing and modifying their own behavior to make it more congenial to children with a specific temperament profile. For example, when a child is given more time to adjust to novel situations, with appropriate boundaries imposed on his or her behaviors, the child will gradually reach a more optimal level of adjustment to the demands of his or her environment (Chess & Thomas, 1986). This principle is substantiated throughout the book.

Temperament in Development Contexts

A distinct feature of the book is the mapping of repercussions of temperamental characteristics on a wide range of developmental issues pertaining to self-, social, and cognitive development. It shows the developmental consequences of a good or poor fit. By weaving temperamental constructs into the discourse of cognitive and social–emotional development, the author is able to connect seemingly incompatible constructs and theories in a meaningful way.

Temperament Versus Psychopathology

By putting temperament in developmental contexts, the author is also able to spell out developmental underpinnings of psychopathology from a temperament perspective. Developmental psychology and clinical psychology are the two major subfields of psychology studying child temperament; however, they have been for the most part noncommunicative. In terms of theoretical contexts, for example, developmental psychologists primarily focus on models of normal development, whereas clinical psychologists focus on models of psychopathology. Methodologically, the former tend to rely on statistical inferences, whereas clinical psychology uses more case studies. Such differences have made it very difficult to integrate studies and applications across these disciplines (Frick, 2004).

The author focuses her attention on the differences between temperament and behavioral disorders in child psychopathology. She lists the characteristics of major behavior disorders and helps parents and professionals to differentiate temperament in normal development, particularly difficult temperament, from behavioral disorders. The author holds that even children who are extreme in one or more styles do not necessarily have a disorder. If parents know how to provide these children with a "good fit" through environmental adaptations, these children may develop normally, even if they are prone to a specific type of disorder. On the other hand, conditions that are seemingly temperamental by nature may have deeper psychopathological underpinnings.

It is not easy to draw a clear line between normal temperament and behavior disorders. Despite the limited research and clinical application, Kristal suggests major principles of using the concept of temperament in mental health settings. She notes that misunderstanding of temperament may lead to misdiagnosis of child psychopathology. Identified characteristics of temperament, such as high activity level, low persistence, and high distractibility, may be misdiagnosed as attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder, a condition that sometimes requires medication for proper treatment (Carey, 1997). The framework the author offers that allows incorporation of temperament constructs enables the practitioner to recognize and explain syndromes representing extremes of the normal continuum that do not meet diagnostic criteria.

Although researchers do not agree as to whether temperament and psychopathology are different constructs that can confound each other or the same construct with psychopathology being an extreme along a temperament dimension (Frick, 2004), it is commonly accepted that temperamental extremes constitute risk factors. Therefore, a better understanding of temperament, coupled with preventive and early intervention measures, may facilitate positive development rather than psychopathological ones.

Application of Temperament Theory Into Practice

The overall goal of the book is pragmatic rather than intellectual in nature. With the idea of embracing and working with the individuality of each child, the author provides specific strategies and techniques to address problematic situations and typical behavior problems that occur in different environments and at different ages. Such temperament-based intervention aims to increase the awareness and sympathetic understanding of children's behavior on the part of caregivers and practitioners, and ultimately to improve individual children's self-esteem, self-regulation, and positive development with proper guidance and assistance. Such practical guidance has the potential to reframe adult perceptions and assist caregivers in responding more effectively to children's temperament-related needs.

The author synthesizes research and indicates that parents and practitioners who understand the variations of temperament can gain insights on behavior, anticipate problems, and determine strategies to address difficulties. The author relies on scientific research as well as her clinical insights in developing innovative, individualized interventions directed at children and their caregivers. To effectively decrease risks and foster protective factors, the author recommends prevention programs for child personal growth, crisis management, and psychopathological issues. The main message is that caregivers, teachers, and mental health professionals need to understand the balance between accommodating to the child's temperament and enforcing routines that develop skills to cope with challenges associated with particular temperament profiles. This strategy is meaningfully cast in a broad conceptual perspective, addressing temperament, parenting, and school environment. Taken together, the author provides an elaborated framework for intervention aimed at reducing behavior problems while fostering prosocial skills and diminishing caregiver distress.

The Challenge of Assessing Temperament: Value-Laden or Value-Neutral?

With a comprehensive description of different assessment tools and their applications in clinical settings, the author delineates the uses of various ways of getting information about temperament. Consistent with Thomas and Chess (1977), the author seems to treat temperament dimensions as descriptive rather than evaluative. The author seems to agree that although temperament may be biologically based, its expression, social acceptance, and impact on individual functioning and development may be moderated by societal and cultural norms and expectations. If so, it can be argued that many temperament dimensions are not value-neutral but value-laden, such as distractibility or slow adaptivity. If temperament dimensions have evaluative connotations, it follows that different cultures may gauge or calibrate children's temperament differently. For example, although discrepancies of parents' ratings are discussed in the book, such limitations are not discussed in light of cultural differences. With increasingly higher percentages of ethnic minorities in the United States, different cultures may differentially regulate the expression of children's temperamental characteristics through parents' and teachers' role expectations, perceptions, and even cultural scripts of what children are like at what age and how they should behave (i.e., implicit theory of child development), and what is considered “normal” and what constitutes “deviations.” Cultural differences can be seen in terms of the salience and dominance of certain temperamental characteristics. If expectations for self-control differ across cultures, one would expect different thresholds for calibrating such temperamental traits as activity level or distractibility. For example, Chinese American parents may have a tendency to rate activity level higher than their White American counterparts simply because

they expect children to be capable of controlling their behavior and motor activity with effort. Thus, the validity of parents' perceptions regarding manifestations of temperamental characteristics may be questionable for people from different ethnicity groups but understandable in the context of that culture involved.

There are also developmental consequences of child–environment interaction in that cultural context. For example, if shyness is seen as a valued trait, it may elicit parental warmth rather than overprotectiveness and disapproval and thus may be innocuous in terms of self-esteem. If volatility is seen as a sign of alertness or even intelligence, it may be socially sanctioned and not elicit the parental rejection and punitiveness found in Anglo-dominated populations. Similarly, cultures may vary in their beliefs about the extent to which a child can control or moderate the expression of their temperament proclivities (distractibility, negative mood, etc.) and hence influence reactions and strategies in terms of managing the child's behavior.

Culture and environmental factors must be considered when designing temperament-based strategies and intervention programs. Indeed, prevention programs for a disadvantaged, minority, inner-city population seem more urgent. In addition, our understanding of how temperament works in a broader social context will be enhanced by closer examination of the role of culture-specific attitudes, expectations, and beliefs about temperament and parenting practices.

The Efficacy of Interventions and Strategies

In the process of translating temperament theories into practice, it is important to evaluate the effectiveness of strategies and intervention, and to make adjustments as necessary. However, due to limited research and clinical information in this area, the author does not provide sufficient evidence for the efficacy of the temperament counseling and other intervention programs. It is essential that an iterative approach to intervention be used, in which current temperament theory is applied first by clinicians in practice and then tested through research. The research results are used in turn to inform theory and improve clinical practice, which will prompt further research.

Temperament: Descriptive Versus Explanatory

Temperamental characteristics are trait-level descriptions. The strengths of temperament theory lie in its insights into distinct behavioral patterns and regularities. However, most temperament theories, including Chess and Thomas's (1996), are descriptive in nature (but see Gray, 1991, for an exception). As such, they do not hold much explanatory power with

respect to the underlying mechanisms (e.g., why a child seems to give up easily). For the same reason, there is a need for a theory of a higher level of abstraction that is capable of elucidating intricate differences and relations between temperamental characteristics and psychopathology. Nevertheless, the weaknesses of temperament theories are well compensated for by their practical utility in various settings, as is well demonstrated in the book. More important, by putting temperament in functional contexts, the author shows temperament at work—how temperamental characteristics interact with the environment, engendering developmental consequences of the intellectual or social nature—and redeems the meaning of temperamental traits as fully functional and dynamic. Once we go beyond the trait descriptions to understand temperamental manifestations as indicative of characteristic ways of interacting with the environment, they start to reveal true meaning and significance of temperament.

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