

Critically examine the contribution of jean piaget essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



This essay shall examine the contribution of Jean Piaget to our understanding of child development. Until the mid 1900's psychologists had no useful theory for explaining how children's minds change as they age. Psychologists interested in this field either had to study it in relation to behaviourism, which emphasises that children merely receive information from the environment, or in relation to the IQ testing approach, which emphasises individual differences in children's development. However developmental psychologist Jean Piaget born in Switzerland in 1896 changed the way we think about children's minds. When Piaget's theories were introduced psychologists the world over embraced his idea that children actively construct their cognitive world as they go through a series of stages. Piaget's theory of cognitive development shall be discussed in this essay in light of its various processes and the four stages of cognitive development - Sensorimotor stage, Preoperational stage, Concrete Operational stage and Formal Operational stage.

Piaget believed that children actively construct their cognitive world. Schemas are used in order to make sense of what they experience. An example of a schema at an early age would be sucking and later more complex schemas might include licking, blowing and crawling. Piaget had an interest in schemas as they help in organizing and making sense out of current experience. Piaget believed that the processes assimilation and accommodation are responsible for how people use and adapt their schemas. Assimilation occurs when individuals incorporate new information into existing knowledge. Calling the milkman "daddy" may be an example of assimilation as the child adjusts by perceiving something unfamiliar as

familiar. Accommodation occurs when individuals adjust their schemas to new information. In the above example accommodation is used to balance assimilation when the child adjusts his or her behaviour and the milkman will be called "milkman". Accommodation and assimilation interplay throughout the lifespan. Assimilation gets ahead of accommodation and then accommodation catches up to form, temporarily, the 'ideal' equilibrium.

Another important element of Piaget's theory is his observation that we go through four stages in our development. These stages are age related and consist of distinct ways of thinking. In Piaget's theory it is not the level of knowledge that makes one stage more advanced than another. It is the different way of understanding the world that makes one stage more advanced than another. The child's cognition is qualitatively different from one stage to the next. The four stages in Piaget's theory of cognitive development are the sensorimotor stage, the preoperational stage, the concrete operational stage and the formal operational stage.

The sensorimotor stage lasts approximately from birth to two years of age. In this stage the infant uses senses and motor abilities to understand the world. There is no conceptual thought. An object is known in terms of what an infant can do with it. During this stage the child will learn object permanence, - i. e. that an object still exists when it is out of sight - and begins to think through mental actions as well as physical actions. Piaget identified six stages of sensorimotor intelligence. Stage 1 involves reflex activity and lasts from birth to 1 month old. During this stage the infant practises the innate reflexes such as sucking and looking. Stage 2 involves

primary circular reactions and lasts from 1 to 4 months old. During this stage babies begin to repeat and modify actions that they find pleasurable or satisfying. Often these actions come about by chance. Stage 3 involves secondary circular reactions and lasts from 4 to 8 months of age.

During this stage behaviour is focused on objects outside the infant's own body that the infant repeatedly engages in because they are pleasurable. Stage 4 involves the coordination of secondary schemata and lasts from 8 to 12 months old. During this period the infant uses a combination of particular schemata to achieve a specific goal. Stage 5 involves tertiary circular reactions and lasts from 12 to 18 months. During this stage the infants experiment with the properties of external objects and try to learn how objects respond to various actions. The process of trial and error is used during this stage. Stage 6 involves inventing new means by mental combination and lasts from 18 to 24 months old. In this last stage children begin to combine schemata mentally, thus relying less on physical trial and error.

The second stage in Piaget's theory of cognitive development is the preoperational stage. This stage lasts from approximately 2 to 7 years of age. Preoperational thought is more symbolic than sensorimotor thought. The infant begins to use symbols such as words, images and gestures to represent objects and events in their world. Piaget divided the preoperational period into two separate stages, the pre-conceptual and the intuitive stages. Characteristics present during the pre-conceptual stage which lasts from 2 to 4 years old include animistic thinking and egocentricity.

Animistic thinking is the attribution of life to inanimate objects. For example, a child may think that plants feel pain when they pick their flowers.

Egocentrism is the tendency to view the world from one's own perspective and to have difficulty seeing things from another's viewpoint. The intuitive stage lasts approximately from 4 to 7 years old. During the intuitive stage the child begins to solve problems by means of specific mental operations but cannot explain how they arrive at the solutions.

The concrete-operational stage is the third stage in Piaget's theory of cognitive development and lasts from approximately 7 to 12 years old. During this time children acquire cognitive operations and think more logically about real objects and experiences. During the concrete-operational stage children become capable of mental seriation, which is a cognitive operation that allows one to mentally order a set of stimuli along a quantifiable dimension such as height or weight. A group of concrete-operational thinkers would be able to use mental seriation to organize themselves in a line which goes by height from tallest to shortest. Concrete operators also master the related concept of transitivity, which is the ability to recognise relations among elements in a serial order. For example, if A is more than B and B is more than C then A is more than C. Piaget noticed that some forms of conservation are understood much sooner than others. Piaget used the term horizontal decalage to describe this. According to Piaget horizontal decalage is an inability to solve certain problems even though one can solve similar problems requiring the same mental operations. Piaget

believed that this occurs due to problems appearing similar may actually differ in complexity.

The formal-operational stage was Piaget's fourth and final stage of cognitive development. This stage lasts from approximately 12 years onward. The individual now begins to think more rationally and systematically about abstract concepts and hypothetical events. Piaget referred to hypothetico-deductive reasoning as a formal-operational ability to think hypothetically. Formal-operational individuals are not restricted to thinking about previously acquired facts but can generate hypotheses. What is possible is more important to formal-operational thinkers than what is real. Piaget believed that the transition from concrete to formal-operational reasoning takes place very gradually. He never identified a stage beyond formal operations and he believed that most people show at least some signs of the highest level of intellect by ages 15 to 18. Later in his career Piaget suggested that perhaps nearly all adults are capable of reaching reasoning at a formal level, but do so only on problems which are of interest or importance to them.

This essay has examined the contribution of Jean Piaget to our understanding of child development. It described his theory of cognitive development in particular the four stages of development - sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete-operational and formal-operational. Although many of Piaget's beliefs have been questioned since its introduction of his theory of cognitive development, it still remains to be the framework for development from birth and throughout the lifespan.