Psychology child development

1. Evaluate Paiget’s theory of child development? Jean Piaget’s (1896 – 1980) theory of cognitive development during childhood was regarded as the major paradigm in which to understand the complex procedure of mental progression through different levels of thinking and understanding. One of the most important contributions that Piaget made, was to establish the fact that the cognitive processes of young children are not simply immature versions of that of an adult, but that they have their very own rules. Piaget’s theory and findings have been widely challenged.

Never the less, Piaget’s ideas still maintain a vital influence in both general psychology and contemporary education. Piaget contended that cognitive development can be divided into four stages. This essay will look at and examine each stage individually and then evaluate Piaget’s theories by exploring some of the major criticisms and supporting views. Each stage is characterized by an overall structure and a sequence of development which occurs within this structure. According to Piagetian theory, these structures consist of “ schemas”, which are essentially, ways of organizing experience.

According to Piaget, schemas are the primary component of intelligent behavior. These schemas adapt through a continuous process of “ assimilation” and “ accommodation,” in an endeavor to attain “ equilibrium” which is essentially balance. Assimilation is the process of adapting new experiences to fit into existing schemas. Accommodation is the process of changing existing schemas to fit new experiences. The first of Piaget’s stages of cognitive development is the “ sensorimotor stage”. This stage occurs around 0-2 years.

It is essentially a stage of practical discovery, which occurs by interaction with the environment through the senses and by using motor skills. A baby accommodates and assimilates information which it encounters into schemas. Piaget contends that a baby is born with no sense of “ object permanence”. This is the understanding that objects continue to exist in their own right, when they are not being directly manipulated or immediately perceived. Piaget conducted an experiment to demonstrate the failure of object permanence on his daughter Jacqueline.

This involved her trying to locate a rattle under a bed cover. He concluded from his observations of infants that it is during the first 2 years of a baby’s life (during the sensorimotor stage) that it acquires object permanence. (Piaget 1963). The other major progression in the sensorimotor stage is the development of what Gleitman calls “ the beginnings of representational thought. ” (Gleitman 1995). This term refers to the acquisition of language, make believe play and deferred imitation. Deferred imitation is the imitation of an action which has occurred sometime in the past.

The second of Piaget’s stages is the “ pre-operational stage”. This stage lasts from the ages of 2 – 7. Piaget contended that at this time a child fails to “ conserve”. This is basically the understanding that things remain constant in terms of number, quantity and volume regardless of changes in appearance. In experiments to test number conservation, Piaget showed the child two sets of checkers which had exactly the same number of checkers in each set. He then re-arranged one of the sets, keeping the same amount of checkers in it, so that it was only different in appearance.

In Piaget’s findings the children in this stage of development believed that the sets were in fact of different quantity. Piaget argued that this occurred because the child is unable to conserve previous information. (Piaget 1952). Within the pre-operational stage, Piaget identified a characteristic that he referred to as “ egocentrism. ” This is the child’s inability to see the world from another’s perspective. They are quite literally self-centred. Piaget observed this phenomenon in his “ Three mountains scene” experiment (Piaget & Inhelder, 1956).

In this experiment the child was sat on one side of a model of three mountains, with a teddy sat at the opposite side. The child was asked to choose a picture which showed the scene that the teddy was able to see. Piaget discovered that until the age of seven, a child is unable to perceive a different viewpoint, from its own and is therefore said to be egocentric. Piaget saw many of the problems of the pre-operational stage child resulting from this inability to “ de-centre”. The next stage is the “ concrete operations” stage which lasts from about the ages of 7 – 11 years.

In this stage, children can perform operations requiring logic such as conservation. But this ability only holds for what he called concrete situations. That is, the child is only able to perform mental actions on actual objects and not in abstract terms. In the concrete operational stage, the child is no longer egocentric and now has the ability to de-centre. Beyond 11 years the child is said to enter the final stage in cognitive development which is the “ formal operations” stage. In this period, the child is able to think and reason scientifically.

The child is also able to imagine and deliberate that which has never actually been encountered. Piaget's theories and findings have been widely challenged. Psychologists such as Meadows (1988) have suggested that Piaget underestimated the cognitive abilities of children. Meadows believes that Piaget ignored individual differences in his studies. It has also been argued that Piaget ignored both emotional and social influences on cognitive development. Another aspect of Piaget's work which has frequently come under criticism is his methodology: In his experiments he used basic question and answer techniques.

But his questions were not standardized and tailored very much to the individual. Additionally, he used no statistical analysis of his results. This makes them very difficult to translate and to make comparisons between children. Ginsberg (1981) and Dansen argue that Piaget's methods of studying children are excellent for examining " the subtleties of the child's cognitive structure. " However, it has been suggested that the instructions given to the children in Piaget's experiments were perhaps difficult for children to understand, and easily misunderstood.

Piaget asked the children the same questions more than once, and it has been argued that this could quite possibly cause confusion as it may have led the children to believe that the original answer that they gave was incorrect. Rose and Blank (1974) and Samuel and Bryant (1984) recreated Piaget's conservation experiments. They asked only one question and both experiments produced very different results to Piaget's in that the children made very few errors. In his original theory, Piaget saw cognitive development as happening in discrete stages.

This has been widely disputed in contemporary psychology. Even Piaget himself, in 1970, said that cognitive development was more like a “ spiral” process of changes than one of discrete stages. Meadows found inconsistencies in the performance of children within the stages of development. Her findings showed that cognitive progression does not necessarily occur at exactly the ages Piaget predicted. Some cognitive processes may in fact develop at different speeds. The stages are now seen by many psychologists as overlapping and therefore more continuous than discrete in nature.

According to Piaget, it should not be possible to accelerate the cognitive development through the various stages. Meadows (1988) argued to the contrary that training does in fact produce improvements in performance, which can be quite notable and long lasting. For example, pre-school age children have been successfully taught to perform concrete operational assignments three to four years ahead of time. Their competence in these tasks was comparable to untrained eight-year-olds.

However, other experiments to accelerate the learning process have produced more ambiguous results. similar age boundaries to describe periods of cognitive develop as those described in Piaget’s stage theory. Despite the numerous objections to Piaget’s theory of cognitive development, he was in fact the first psychologist to even look at how children see the world and as a consequence initiated a vast amount of further study into the area. In those terms he has made a substantial contribution to our understanding and appreciation of this complex subject area.

As we have seen, much of his theory has been directly applied and accepted in modern education. Many of the criticisms of Piaget surround his underestimation of childhood abilities and also the age at which the cognitive developments are said to take place. It is not however, disputed that the changes themselves do in fact occur, so in that respect, Piaget's work has been and still is greatly significant.

2. Discuss how children form attachments citing research evidence by Bowlby and Ainsworth.

Attachment theory is a psychological, evolutionary, and ethological theory concerning relationships between humans. The most important tenet of attachment theory is that a young child needs to develop a relationship with at least one primary caregiver for social and emotional development to occur normally. The theory was formulated by psychiatrist and psychoanalyst John Bowlby. Within attachment theory, infant behavior associated with attachment is primarily the seeking of proximity to an attachment figure in stressful situations; the caregiver.

Infants become attached to adults who are sensitive and responsive in social interactions with them, and who remain as consistent caregivers for some months during the period from about six months to two years of age. During the latter part of this period, children begin to use attachment figures (familiar people) as a secure base to explore from and return to. Parental responses lead to the development of patterns of attachment; these, in turn, lead to internal working models which will guide the individual's feelings, thoughts and expectations in later relationships.

Separation anxiety or grief following the loss of an attachment figure is considered to be a normal and adaptive response for an attached infant. These behaviors may have evolved because they increase the probability of survival of the child. Research by developmental psychologist Mary Ainsworth in the 1960s and 70s underpinned the basic concepts, introduced the concept of the " secure base" and developed a theory of a number of attachment patterns in infants: secure attachment, avoidant attachment and anxious attachment. A fourth pattern, disorganized attachment, was identified later.

In the 1980s, the theory was extended to attachment in adults. Other interactions may be construed as including components of attachment behavior; these include peer relationships at all ages, romantic and sexual attraction and responses to the care needs of infants or the sick and elderly. To formulate a comprehensive theory of the nature of early attachments, Bowlby explored a range of fields, including evolutionary biology, object relations theory (a branch of psychoanalysis), control systems theory, and the fields of ethology and cognitive psychology.

After preliminary papers from 1958 onwards, Bowlby published the full theory in the trilogy Attachment and Loss (1969–82). In the early days of the theory, academic psychologists criticized Bowlby, and the psychoanalytic community ostracized him for his departure from psychoanalytical tenets; however, attachment theory has since become " the dominant approach to understanding early social development, and has given rise to a great surge of empirical research into the formation of children's close relationships".

Later criticisms of attachment theory relate to temperament, the complexity of social relationships, and the limitations of discrete patterns for classifications. Attachment theory has been significantly modified as a result of empirical research, but the concepts have become generally accepted. Attachment theory has formed the basis of new therapies and informed existing ones, and its concepts have been used in the formulation of social and childcare policies to support the early attachment relationships of children. The attachment behavioral system serves to maintain or achieve closer proximity to the attachment figure.

Pre-attachment behaviors occur in the first six months of life. During the first phase (the first eight weeks), infants smile, babble and cry to attract the attention of caregivers. Although infants of this age learn to discriminate between caregivers, these behaviors are directed at anyone in the vicinity. During the second phase (two to six months), the infant increasingly discriminates between familiar and unfamiliar adults, becoming more responsive towards the caregiver; following and clinging are added to the range of behaviors.

Clear-cut attachment develops in the third phase, between the ages of six months and two years. The infant’s behavior towards the caregiver becomes organized on a goal-directed basis to achieve the conditions that make it feel secure. By the end of the first year, the infant is able to display a range of attachment behaviors designed to maintain proximity. These manifest as protesting the caregiver’s departure, greeting the caregiver’s return, clinging when frightened and following when able.

With the development of locomotion, the infant begins to use the caregiver or caregivers as a safe base from which to explore. Infant exploration is greater when the caregiver is present because the infant's attachment system is relaxed and it is free to explore. If the caregiver is inaccessible or unresponsive, attachment behavior is more strongly exhibited. Anxiety, fear, illness and fatigue will cause a child to increase attachment behaviors. After the second year, as the child begins to see the carer as an independent person, a more complex and goal-corrected partnership is formed.

Children begin to notice others' goals and feelings and plan their actions accordingly. For example, whereas babies cry because of pain, two-year-olds cry to summon their caregiver, and if that does not work, cry louder, shout or follow. Whereas Bowlby was inspired by Piaget's insights into children's thinking, current attachment scholars utilize insights from contemporary literature on implicit knowledge, theory of mind, autobiographical memory and social representation.

Psychoanalyst/psychologists Peter Fonagy and Mary Target have attempted to bring attachment theory and psychoanalysis into a closer relationship through cognitive science as mentalization. Mentalization, or theory of mind, is the capacity of human beings to guess with some accuracy what thoughts, emotions and intentions lie behind behaviours as subtle as facial expression. This connection between theory of mind and the internal working model may open new areas of study, leading to alterations in attachment theory.

3. Explain how nature and nurture play a part in a child's development.

The psychological debate of nature vs. nurture is one that has been deliberated and refuted for many years. This debate is so controversial because although it is fact that genetic makeup does play a major role in developing a person, the nurture and environment in which a person is brought up in is also an important factor. The nature vs. nurture issue dates back to Ancient Greeks, through the times of Aristotle and John Locke, with each philosopher projecting their own individual thoughts on the matter.

Although nature depicts the development of a person in terms of their appearance and certain personality traits, nature and the setting and situations in which a person grows up is more important in explaining the development of a person because ultimately a person is an overall reflection of the environment of which they were brought up in. Psychologists are quick to support the nature debate because it deals with the genetic make-up of a person and biological psychology, which is fact. First of all, a person’s physical traits, such as eye color and blood type are genetically determined, even though there are certain ways to alter your look.

Personality is proven to be heritable to an extent. Studies have proven that biological siblings are more similar in personality that adoptive siblings. In addition, a person’s genes can determine whether a person is predisposed to a disease or illness, such as diabetes and Alzheimer’s (Davies). A person who is affected with those types of diseases shows how nature can directly effect the development of an individual. A new technique called developmental genetic analysis is a procedure that examines the effects of genes throughout a person’s life.

The technique concluded that a person’s intelligence is due about 50% to the genes they are born with (Huang). Furthermore, the nature debate is credible because of the genetic factors that support how people’s personalities and appearance develops, yet the nurture of a person ultimately overshadows the nature debate because environmental factors better influence the development of a person. Each person comes from different backgrounds, religions, and environments, which are all external factors that play a large role in the development of an individual.

Diet, stress, prenatal nutrition, peer pressure, and television are just some of the more specific environmental factors that can affect a person. Clearly, there are many more aspects of the nurture debate that contribute to the argument that a person’s upbringing is what will influence their development. For example, NBC reported that in a study where teenagers played violent video games and non violent video games, the violent video games were proven to enhance emotion in the amygdale, or the center for fear and aggression (Kalning).

In this case the emotional effect from the video games supports the nurture debate because normal teenagers with non violent behaviors and tendencies were affected by an outside force that has the potential of affecting the teenager’s personalities. Nurture is more important in developing a person because despite a person’s genetic coding, the parents and the adults that a child is subjected to will play a greater role in the child’s development. Research shows that parents who talk to their children and spend time helping them interact ultimately raise more socially developed and intellectually stimulated children (Dewar).

Even if a child born had genius parents, the environment and the early stages of development are crucial for the later stages of life. People are also highly influenced by their peers, and in the case of preschoolers who typically dislike a certain food will eat that particular food if children around them are eating it, showing that because it is the way of the human to want to fit and be liked, nurture has the greater impact and influence over a person (Harris).

Furthermore, nurture is more important in shaping a human being because there are multiple factors that can influence a person differently, even if they have the same genetic background. Even though the nature vs. nurture debate is likely to always be challenged and discussed, it is possible that there may never be a right answer. The reason for this is that many situations and conditions factor in both the nature and nurture debate and there is reasoning in both cases to support either one as a reliable source.

Overall, the biological traits and genes of a person enable individuals to learn and adapt to their surroundings, thus showing the debate is so closely related that it is difficult to determine which one more effectively contributes to the development of a person. However, the nurture issue states that a person is affected of the environment that they are brought up in, which is a more reliable source of the development of a person because there are more factors that influence environment than the biological aspects of the nature debate.