

Sociocultural theory  
individuals  
involvement in social  
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Sociocultural theory (SCT) illustrates how an individual's development is connected to cultural, social and historical framework. The main focus of SCT, in particular, is an individual's connection and involvement in social interactions and culturally controlled activities which shape and construct mental development.

Sociocultural perspective centres on the social framework as fundamental to learning. It lays emphasis on the importance of social interactions by communicating and instructing in learning, highlighting that the social environment is not just the place where learning happens, it is integral to it.

SCT suggests learning is a cultural action, young children are seen as novices within a cultural setting that learn from elders of that way of life, therefore, learning can be either formal or informal and achieved via parents, siblings, friends, teachers etc... This results in children learning about the practices, beliefs and values of the community they grow up in or are placed in, consequently learning to become members of that community/group.

SCT also explains and acknowledges individual differences in learning via the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky(1896 -1934)). This is the gap amid what an individual is capable of doing on their own and what they can do with assistance of a knowledgeable other, ensuring that a child can accomplish jointly what s/he could not achieve alone.

A major scholar that was vital to the progression of cultural-historical psychology and creator of SCT as we now know it, was Lev S. Vygotsky (1896 -1934). Vygotsky was a Russian psychologist whose work was banned and  
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prohibited under Joseph Stalin in 1936, this ban was later lifted in 1956 three years after Stalin's death.

Vygotsky first started working as a psychology teacher in 1917 and during this period he was accumulating information simultaneously for his thesis and a book that was to be named 'Pedagogical Psychology', of which, was published in 1926. Vygotsky inspired a lot of original research and his works were translated into English in the 1960's. He also became influential within education around the 1980's and to this day. (<http://vygotsky.afraid.org/#TimelineVygotskysLifeWorks>)

Vygotsky's work was based on Marxist and social constructivist theories. Vygotsky stated that his academic focus was "to learn from Marx's whole method how to build a science, how to approach the investigation of the mind" (Vygotsky, cited Ratner(1997)) and also build upon an overt Marxist psychology. Vygotsky believed "Marxist psychology is not a school amidst schools, but the only genuine psychology as a science. A psychology other than this cannot exist...everything that was and is genuinely scientific belongs to Marxist psychology" (Vygotsky, cited Ratner(1997)).

Vygotsky suggested that development took place on two planes, that of the social plane via interaction and through a psychological plane as learners internalise meanings, for example, putting together a jigsaw puzzle or reading a picture book. He also believed that cognitive development occurred through conversations and interactions with more capable members of a group/culture.

SCT took into account aspects of creativity and that education should not solely be concerned with learning knowledge and skills but for children to develop the capacity to think clearly, to plan and be able to pass on their understanding via interaction and communication.

The key to human intelligence, Vygotsky discovered, was to effectively utilize different types of tools, not the material tools we use to increase our physical capabilities such as cutlery or levers, but psychological tools extending mental capabilities such as language and writing. These tools are described as cultural tools, of which, Vygotsky believed language to be the most important of all; as language facilitates humans to make sense of the world, is the medium of sharing knowledge and is the basis of thought.

The interrelationship of language and thought was also a factor Vygotsky held to be of prominence in an individual's development. It is often noticed that young children run a commentary of what they are doing and seeing, a child develops this external speech which later in life becomes internalised as thought, therefore, speech formation that is mastered by children then becomes the basic structures of their thinking.

Vygotsky was a prolific writer; he successfully built up a plethora of ideas in his short life as a scholar (he died when he was just 37 years of age of Tuberculosis). As a result, whilst a good deal of the framework for SCT was presented by Lev Vygotsky; growth, expansion and enhancement of SCT is evident in text regarding cultural-historical activity theory (Cole, 1996; Cole & Engeström, 1994) and activity theory (Chaiklin & Lave, 1993; Leontiev, 1981)

Further to this, in the Soviet Union, the Kharkov School of Psychology was vital for preserving the contribution of Lev Vygotsky. There, the students accomplished new avenues of subsequent development.

Jerome Bruner was firstly influenced by Jean Piaget's work of cognitive development although later by Vygotsky who's work he broadly developed. Bruner agreed with SCT that a child's social environment, and for the most part, social interaction were particularly imperative in the process of development and learning.

Bruner's theory of 'scaffolding' is a theory that stemmed from Vygotsky's theory of ZPD. Focusing on learning via communication between child and adult. Scaffolding refers to the gradual retraction of adult influence and direction, as the child develops greater mastery of a given task.

Another academic that built upon Vygotsky's works of SCT include Barbara Rogoff, she writes:

" Children's cognitive development is an apprenticeship-it occurs through guided participation in social activity with companions who support and stretch children's understanding of and skill in using the tools of the culture" (1990: 7)

Its evident that Rogoff's theory of 'guided participation' builds on Bruner's theory of scaffolding, highlighting that " children's cognitive development" takes place in a social context while expanding SCT beyond language-based dialogue; as the " guided" learner is also guided by the books that they read,

the internet sites they visit and the importance of other such methods of unspoken communication.

Rogoff has sourced many books on psychology, one of which 'The Cultural Nature of Human Development'(2003) examines, amongst many other things, the role of culture in human development and recognizing the arrangement of similarities and differences between cultural communities. For instance, the involvement children have in activities that their elders carry out in the community, which is subsequently the passing on of knowledge and cultural tools. This notion originates and builds upon Vygotsky's SCT.

Having presented SCT, I will now briefly put forward the theory I will compare it with which is the Piagetian developmental model.

Piagetian developmental model was founded by the work of Jean Piaget (1896 - 1980). He was a Swiss

[HYPERLINK](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Developmental_psychologist) "https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Developmental\_psychologist" psychologist and philosopher who believed children's education was extremely important. As a result, his work focused largely on the development of infants in particular, he was so interested in this area that he gained a lot of his empirical evidence from observing and interviewing his own three children.

Piagetian developmental model refers to how the individual understands things and gains knowledge in terms of developmental stages and learning styles. It is about the individual acting as the active agent whom interacts with the world that surrounds them. According to Piaget, " the child is

someone who constructs his own moral world view, who forms ideas about <https://assignbuster.com/sociocultural-theory-individuals-involvement-in-social-interactions-education-essay/>

right and wrong, and fair and unfair, that are not the direct product of adult teaching and that are often maintained in the face of adult wishes to the contrary" (Gallagher & Reid (1979): 26).

Piaget was a professor of psychology at the University of Geneva (1929-1975) and restructured the cognitive development theory into stages, which built upon previous work from James Mark Baldwin(1861-1934) an American philosopher and psychologist.

These four developmental stages are (1) infancy, (2) pre-school, (3) childhood, and (4) adolescence.

Each stage has a cognitive construction which dictates the child's way of thinking and the child's grasp of reality, as the child goes from one stage to the next, except the last, there is always an insufficient understanding of reality, a disequilibrium is caused which in turn results in the reorganisation of thought structures.

The four development stages are described in Piaget's theory as:

Sensorimotor stage: from birth to age 2 years (children experience the world through movement and senses and learn object permanence)

Preoperational stage: from ages 2 to 7 (acquisition of motor skills)

Concrete operational stage: from ages 7 to 11 (children begin to think logically about concrete events)

Formal operational stage: after age 11 (development of abstract reasoning).

(Rosenfield & Santrock (1998))

Piaget therefore found that this theory is connected by two vital components; one part that prognosticates a child's capabilities dependant of their age/biological maturation and a theory that illustrates the way a learner develops, what steps or stages that an individual must travel through to end up with an outcome, a predetermined objective.

Piaget proposes, by his theory of cognitive development, that an individual can not simply be presented with information and for them to make sense of it straight away. Consequently, a construction of an individuals own knowledge that is built by their own experiences is required. This formation of experiences can then permit learners to make schemas, these are an individuals mental structure and personal understanding of the world around them, that is accordingly changed and built upon dependent on the increase of opportunities to explore their world. The original idea of schemas was proposed by philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) as innate structures used to help us perceive the world (Eysenck (2010)). This change or upgrade is accomplished by two collaborating procedures: Assimilation and Accommodation.

Assimilation is a mental process of receiving and adapting new information into the pre-existing schema. Its about making sense of something new based on what one already knows and is moderately subjective as an individual adjusts a new concept as to correspond with previous notions and ideas. For example a child knows an animal to have four legs and when that child see a dog he calls it an animal, when the child is informed that this is



not only an animal but a dog assimilation takes place and from then on as s/he encounters more different types of four legged creatures the process of assimilation continues each time ending with the state of equilibrium which renders that stage or understanding as complete

Accommodation can be described as a mental process one uses to become accustomed to the new information that is set before us, so for instance it is a process that takes place when there is no pre-existing schema and a whole new concept needs to be understood. For example as stated above the child accustomed to the notion of animals having four legs, so when encountering a monkey the child will have to accommodate that not all animals walk on all fours all the time. The process of accommodation can be more distressing for the learner causing a 'disequilibrium', especially for infants who go through the process of potty training for instance, as the whole concept is different and out of the child's comfort zone therefore this process can take a longer period of time.

Piaget's theory is used today in the way key stages are set up in the current primary and secondary curriculum and therefore exemplifies the magnitude of his work. There are also theorists that build upon his concept of developmental models who are known as neo-Piagetian's such as Hughes, Bower and Wishart who have modified certain experiments such as the object permanence test (Bower and Wishart (1972)) and the 'policemen doll' experiment (Hughes (1975)) which both demonstrate a flaw in Piaget's experimental process.

Having briefly presented the two theories of cognitive development, I will now discuss some similarities and differences, developing some of the key ideas of each theory.

Piagetian developmental model and SCT mutually agree that a child's cognitive development takes place in stages (Jarvis & Chandler (2001): 149), however, the way in which these stages are portrayed by each theory differ. Whilst Piaget looked at a child's cycle of life from birth to adulthood as being a stage by stage learning pathway such as, preoperational stage taking place from ages 2 to 7, Vygotsky looked at the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) where a child is moved on from one stage of unknowing to the stage of knowing with the help and guidance of a knowledgeable other, which is not based on biological maturation and age but on an individual's personal level of attainment.

Vygotsky's concept of 'ZPD' illustrates a child's existing and possible capability to do something. (Flanagan 1999 P. 72). Vygotsky states that there are three stages that a learner will progress through, the first being tasks that could not be performed even with help, the second which is 'assisted performance' where tasks are being accomplished by means of assistance from a knowledgeable other and finally the third which is "independent performance" where a learner can complete a task independently and without assistance. For that reason, the concept of 'ZPD' can allow for deeper and enhanced comprehension of the learning process itself (Flanagan 1999 P. 73) and also an effective way of evaluating a learner's capability as opposed to generalising children into stages or bands of development, as Piaget does with his stage theory.

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Further to this, in one of Bruner's books 'The Process of Education' (1960) he explains his SCT view on 'the readiness for learning' which is unlike Piaget's developmental model of stage by stage learning dependant of biological maturation. He suggests that: '...any subject can be taught effectively in some intellectually honest form to any child at any stage of development.' (ibid.: 33) He goes on to refer to his concept of the 'Spiral curriculum': 'A curriculum as it develops should revisit this basic ideas repeatedly, building upon them until the student has grasped the full formal apparatus that goes with them' (ibid.: 13).

Piaget established a concept that a child's way of thinking differentiates as they grow from infancy to childhood right up until adulthood. This journey of stages that one passes through as one 'matures' is segmented into four stages of cognitive development (as mentioned previously) which is defined as Piaget's Stage Theory. (Ginsburg, Opper (1979): 26). Piaget put forward that these stages were universal for all children, for example the progression of how a child encountered each stage was set to a fixed pathway from one stage to the next, also, he acknowledged that the speed at which a child went, from beginning to end, would vary and therefore relative to their age/maturation.

The transition from one stage to the next, consequently, was only possible when the child was cognitively ready and he believed that a child should not be pushed to learn the next stage of knowledge pending that the child is cognitively complete in the previous stage.

Therefore it can be suggested that Piaget's theory of stage development can be far more rigid and set, in contrast, SCT believes stages can be revisited and also merge together more continuously to achieve a deeper understanding of knowledge as Bruner states:

To instruct someone... is not a matter of getting him to commit results to mind. Rather, it is to teach him to participate in the process that makes possible the establishment of knowledge. We teach a subject not to produce little living libraries on that subject, but rather to get a student to think mathematically for himself, to consider matters as an historian does, to take part in the process of knowledge-getting. Knowing is a process not a product. (1966: 72)

Therefore it is noticeable that Piagetian developmental model is individualist orientated compared to SCT which is socially and culturally orientated, relying on outside instruction. Piagetian developmental models focal point is the individual and their experiences of their world being the reason of development and in order to learn an individual has to be developed, unlike SCT, which focuses on the social interaction, cultural influence and that development comes after one has learned. As Vygotsky has stated 'Piaget's approach is based on the premise that learning trails behind development, that development always outruns learning...' ((1978): 80) and he explains his viewpoint '...properly organised learning results in mental development and sets in motion a variety of developmental processes that would be impossible apart from learning ((1978): 90)

Both theories acknowledge language as important in an individual's development yet in a totally different degree. Piagetian developmental model suggests that cognitive changes such as thinking and learning were not solely governed by linguistic enhancement or development, whereas SCT deems that language supports the child to excel in freedom of thought and accomplish further cognitive development (Flanagan 1999 P. 59). Piagetian developmental model suggests that language is in motion, from the child towards the social environment. (Ginsburg, Opper (1979): 84). On the other hand, SCT advocates the opposite, that language moved from the social to the individual, of which is internalised into thought. (Jarvis, Chandler (2001): 150).

Piaget could be criticised that his experiments and clinical interviews were inadequately designed. The tasks set out could be seen as inappropriate for children of a certain age group, instructions that were given could appear to be somewhat ambiguous and the tasks themselves boring and lacklustre. In later experiments carried out by neo-Piagetians these kind of impediments were rectified and it was evident that the children's performance had improved a great deal resulting in them to be much more proficient than Piaget confirmed by his research. By simplifying tasks and making them more child friendly, researchers such as Bower and Wishart (1972) with their modification of the object permanence experiment, and Hughes (1975) with the 'policemen doll' experiment, have demonstrated higher cognitive abilities in children who would not be expected to display them according to Piaget's theory. Jerome Bruner writes in *The Process of Education* 'motives for learning must be kept from going passive... they must be based as much

as possible upon the arousal of interest in what there is to be learned, and they must be kept broad and diverse in expression' ((1960): 80).

As I mentioned earlier Vygotsky suggests that egocentric speech that a child uses to problem solve for example becomes internalised as the child reaches adulthood (Jarvis, Chandler (2001): 150) . Vygotsky explains in his posthumous anthology *Thought and Language* that:

1. " In their ontogenetic development, thought and speech have different roots.
2. In the speech development of the child, we can with certainty establish a pre-intellectual stage, and in his thought development, a pre-linguistic stage.
3. Up to a certain point in time, the two follow different lines, independently of each other.
4. At a certain point these lines meet, whereupon thought becomes verbal and speech rational."

[*Thought and Language*, Chapter 4]

Yet, Piaget believed that egocentric speech just purely went along with and connected to whatever action the child was carrying out at that specific time (Ginsburg, Opper (1979): 84), and once the child matured to adulthood this speech was simply not needed and disappeared. Although the two scholars had opposing views on the function and underlying principle of egocentric speech they both acknowledged and granted that it gave support to cognitive development

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