

# Applying piaget's theory in counselling



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Psychotherapists utilise diverse theoretical models within the counselling environment. With each approach, theory or method that is in use today there are a number of key supporting elements which allow the skilled psychotherapist to understand and contextualise the human condition, based on a foundation of knowledge of how human beings learn, grow and develop physically and psychologically. One such fundamental concept of cognitive development was presented by Jean Piaget (1896-1981) which related to child and adolescent development. The history of Jean Piaget and the details of the four main stages of Cognitive Development that Piaget observed are explained below including a critic and discussion of the use of them in relation to child and adolescent counselling.

Jean PIAGET (1896-1981) was a Swiss developmental psychologist who came from an educated family in Neuchâtel, Switzerland. Piaget studied biology at The University of Neuchâtel, however also showed interest in Psychology and Psychoanalysis. Piaget moved from Switzerland to Paris, France after his graduation and he taught at the Grange-Aux-Belles school for boys, which was run by Alfred Binet. Binet was the developer of the Binet intelligence test and Piaget assisted in the marking of the intelligence tests. Piaget then became interested in the study of child progress as during this time he noticed that at different age brackets children made similarly wrong assumptions or mistakes. Piaget was married and had three children which he also studied from infancy. In 1929, Jean Piaget accepted the post of Director of the International Bureau of Education where he stayed until 1968.

Through the study and experimentation of his own children's abilities, from babies through to young adults along with children from the Grange-Aux-

Belles school he detected a number of milestones and time relative achievements which are common to human development. ' He concluded that these similarities are the result of a sequence of development that all children follow. Completion of each period, with its corresponding abilities is the prerequisite for entering the next period." (G Neil Martin, 2007)

Piaget categorized these four stages as Sensory Motor, Preoperational, Concrete Operations and Formal Operations; the periods are explained in further detail below.

### Sensory motor

The first stage of Piaget's theory lasts from birth to approximately age two and is centered on the infant trying to make sense of the world. During the sensory motor stage, an infant's knowledge of the world is limited to their sensory perceptions and motor activities. Utilizing skills and abilities they were born with, such as looking, sucking, grasping, and listening, to learn more about the environment. During this stage, a child has relatively little competence in representing the environment using images, language, or symbols. An infant has no awareness of objects or people that are not immediately present at a given moment. Piaget called this a lack of object permanence. Object permanence is the awareness that objects and people continue to exist even if they are out of sight. When a person hides, the infant has no knowledge that they are just out of sight. According to Piaget, this person or object that has disappeared is gone forever to the infant. Towards the end of this period the infant then builds an understanding of himself or herself and reality (and how things work) through interactions with

the environment. Learning takes place via assimilation (the organization of information and absorbing it into existing schema) and accommodation (when an object cannot be assimilated and the schemata have to be modified to include the object). The sensory motor stage can be divided into six separate sub stages that are characterized by the development of a new skill. Reflexes (0-1 month), Primary Circular Reactions (1-4 months), Secondary Circular Reactions (4-8 months), Coordination of Reactions (8-12 months), Tertiary Circular Reactions (12-18 months) and Early Representational Thought (18-24 months).

The Preoperational Period (Two – Seven years)

The most important development at this time is language. Children develop an internal representation of the world that allows them to describe people, events, and feelings. The child starts to have an intuitive grasp of logical concepts in some areas. However there is still a tendency to focus attention on one aspect of an object while ignoring others.

The thinking is still egocentric and they have difficulty taking the viewpoint of other people. At this stage that can start to group or classify objects: e. g. can group things together such as all the red blocks regardless of shape or all the square blocks regardless of colour. Piaget noted that children in this stage do not yet understand concrete logic, cannot mentally manipulate information, and are unable to take the point of view of other people, which he termed egocentrism.

During the preoperational stage, children also become increasingly adept at using symbols, as evidenced by the increase in playing and pretending. For

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example, a child is able to use an object to represent something else, such as pretending a box is a boat.. A child in the preoperational stage also lacks the principle of conservation; this is the knowledge that quantity is unrelated to the arrangement and physical appearance of objects. Children who have not passed this stage do not know that the amount, volume or length of an object does not change length when the shape of the configuration is changed.

#### Period of Concrete Operations (Seven-Twelve years)

The concrete operational stage begins around age seven and continues until approximately age eleven. During this time, children gain a better understanding of mental operations. There is evidence that they show organized, logical thought and have the ability to perform multiple classification tasks, order objects in a logical sequence, and comprehend the principle of conservation. The child's thinking becomes less egocentric and they become capable of concrete problem-solving. On the other hand, children at this age have difficulty using deductive logic, which involves using a general principle to determine the outcome of a specific event.

One of the most important developments in this stage is an understanding of reversibility, or awareness that actions can be reversed. An example of this is being able to reverse the order of relationships between mental categories. For example, a child might be able to recognize that a Sheep is white, that white is a colour, and that the sheep is an animal. Children in the concrete operational stage have a better understanding of time and space.

#### Period of Formal Operations (Twelve years and onwards)

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This period lends itself to the ability to generate abstract propositions, multiple hypotheses and deductive reasoning, with systematic planning including possible outcomes. Piaget believed that deductive logic becomes important during the formal operational stage such as working out proportions and mathematical calculations. Instead of relying solely on previous experiences, children begin to consider possible outcomes and consequences of actions. This type of thinking is important in long-term planning. The child's ability for abstract thinking is very similar to an adult and children at the formal operational stage of cognitive development are often able to quickly plan an organized approach to solving a problem.

Piaget's extensive work has been widely published and is taught in Psychology and educational settings worldwide, inviting research and dispute. There are subsequently many reviews of the work both supportive and critical. " One criticism of Piaget is that he did not always define his terms operationally" (G Neil Martin, 2007). Further criticisms of Piaget's work may include that Piaget creates a somewhat unrealistic paradigm with which to normalise and view childhood progression. The sample groups were from the same social structure and educational background which adds's weight to the lack of a comprehensive and robust experimental sample. Limiting the background or social and environmental factors such as varying level of attention to the child by caregivers or the inclusion of aspects such as poverty, deprivation or even the lack of essential nurturing has allowed the more critical seasoned psychologist the opportunity to rebuff Piaget's findings.

An additional area of criticism of these experiments is the actual level of active participation of the children studied, Piaget states that object permanence is developed as the child develops an understanding of the permanence of objects and that uncovering a hidden toy is a demonstration of this, however has motivation in order for a child to search for the object been taken into account, why would the infant look for the object in the experiments?

Whilst reviewing Piaget's work from the most supportive and positive outlook, it is important for counselling professionals to ensure a grasp of the basic theory and concepts of the growth periods in Human Development. The understanding of Human development is important for the client and counsellor, the counsellor must self examine and be cognisant of any significant developmental issues that may have occurred in their past that would benefit from a review of the theories. Many of the methods and approaches of psychotherapy draw reference to incidents or issues from a client's past. It would be prudent for the counsellor to mentally reference the developmental stages to ascertain how a specific trauma may have been influenced by the level of development of the client at that time. As the age range of clients is varied as noted by (Colin Feltham, 2006) " knowledge of common age-specific characteristics can assist in assessment and therapeutic planning and referral".

With emphasis on young adult counselling for example, when adolescents or young adults enter the period of Formal Operations (Eleven to Fifteen) it can be a distressing period, when the focus is on them to appear to be fitting in and conforming. They are also processing huge change physically,

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emotionally and morally so the better informed and empathic the counsellor is to a client who may be experiencing these changes, the better able the counsellor will be to support and guide.

An example with younger children could be the concepts of death and loss, which according to Piaget, are not processed at the age of three to seven in the same way as that of an adult. It would then be possible to incorrectly transpose adult loss, grief or anger to a younger child and potentially confuse the young client. Piaget shows that there is a lack of maturity of understanding in this area until the child is over seven years of age and into the Operational Period.

Piaget's human development work has provided the backbone of understanding to both psychology and education enabling in both settings additional complex skills to be weaved into the respective processes. It does not seem to propose that the four stages are the only aspects to a child's development; further elements of moral and humanistic study should be used in conjunction with this material in order to round the counsellor's views and knowledge of development. Whilst the focus on physical and scientific developmental tests Piaget placed significant limitations on the depth and scope of the studies, nevertheless Piaget's focus on development has made available to the field of psychology a valuable insight into a way to approach a child or adolescent with respect to their ability to understand concepts and process information.