

PIAGET AND KNOWING. STUDIES IN GENETIC PSYCHOLOGY edited by Beryl A. Geber. Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1977.

EDUCATION ET DEVELOPPEMENT SOCIAL DE L'ENFANT. Christiane Vandenplas-Holper. Presses Universitaires de France, collection 'Pédagogie aujourd'hui', Paris, 1979.

In quite different ways, these two books can be regarded as valuable contributions towards a developmental social psychology.

Beryl Geber presents the aim of her book as being an attempt to help 'students synthesize separate aspects of psychology' and to give research workers, often isolated in their 'fairly narrow problem-bounded part of psychology' an opportunity to become familiar with each other's thinking. The scope is broad indeed, but the contributors have a common concern: how we know, 'how we realize and understand the world around us, both physical and social, concrete and abstract' (Geber, p. 1x and p. 1). This problem has always been Piaget's basic concern. The book's chapters contribute to a critical examination of Piaget's theories in research fields as varied as epistemology (R. Holmes), logical development (P. E. Bryant, P. G. Watson), the figurative and operative aspects of knowledge (H. G. Furth), perception (W. H. N. Hotopf), the relationships amongst cognition, language and social development (B. A. Geber).

Geber's last chapter entitled, 'Towards a developmental social psychology', is the only one in the book that refers directly to social psychology. But before discussing it let us examine a question raised by some of the other papers, because, as they are dealing with more general problems of epistemology, they cannot leave the social psychologist indifferent—and especially so, if he is looking for a possible synthesis, as laid out as the aim of the book.

Piaget's contribution is an attempt to synthesize the various areas of psychological investigation. This he has done by means of the developmental approach and his structural analysis. Although the latter is common to all the authors, some of their interesting attempts to comprehend the status of cognitive structures—or what could be referred to as the dynamics of the development of cognitive structures—might give the reader the feeling that a new synthesis is still far out of sight. Nonetheless is there an issue, commonly raised by the different authors, that might indicate the way to pursue a new integration of the different domains? One such issue has attracted our attention, namely the reliance on the concept of 'meaning' on the part of three authors independently.

Holmes in his analysis of the epistemological foundations of empiricism and psychoanalysis presents an interpretation of the conflicting assumptions of these two systems. An acceptance of Piaget's equilibration model of development, Holmes argues, could make empiricist and psychoanalyst come to terms with

what the other has to say. To do this Holmes presents an extension of Piaget's equilibration model which emphasizes the role of 'purposes' ('disciplined but still assertive "will"' p. 46) in individual behaviour and which throws light on that 'extension of the non-animistic we call "science". "Science" is but the articulated outcome of men's enterprise . . .' Holmes concludes that the 'purposive base of science is all too readily forgotten' and he underlines the need to be 'alert to the motivational dimension of what we see as "there"' (p. 47).

In her chapter, G. Szagun presents an interpretation stressing the importance of the semantic dimensions of the development of children's speech. She presents evidence suggesting, 'that language development is part of general cognitive development, a view which has been held by Piaget' and thereby stresses in her analysis of the acquisition of linguistic structures 'the process and the gradual development of form *and of meaning*' (p. 204) (reviewer's italics).

The importance of taking meaning into account is also the conclusion to which Wason comes when examining critically Piaget's theory of formal operations. The results Wason presents suggest that reasoning, even in highly selected university students, is 'radically affected by content in a systematic way, and this is incompatible with the Piagetian view that in formal operational thought the content of a problem has at last been subordinated to the form of relations to it' (p. 132). '... even mature intelligence is much more affected by content or meaning than the theory of formal operations seems to allow' (p. 134).

This is an interesting convergence of different authors towards an increasing importance granted to the 'purposes' of behaviour, the meaning of communication or the content of the task. It could suggest that a deeper understanding of the role of relevance in cognitive functioning is now required. It could also lead to the careful study of how and under which conditions reality becomes meaningful to the child. In particular, we could ask to what extent the persons living with a child are responsible for the way in which the developing individual comes to interpret his own experience. To what extent also do they induce him to communicate and hence to express himself verbally? Do they draw his 'cognitive attention' to certain problems? Do they get him involved in trying to master certain situations? Could this construction of meaning be essentially a social construction? Exploring such a hypothesis is a task the social psychologist could assign to himself. In doing so he might contribute to—and perhaps go beyond—the scope of the present research reviewed by Geber and bring to attention the casual relationships that bound social interaction and social and cognitive development. It would allow concentration not only on the consequences of maturation or of cognitive development for social concepts and social behaviour, but also on the analysis of the social causes of development. From Geber's review it appears that the link between social and cognitive development has been approached from a mostly correlational point of view quite in accordance with Piaget's hypotheses on the isomorphism of the individual genesis in the two cognitive and social spheres. Geber concludes that indeed a general process of decentration can be observed in different areas 'but the nature of the impetus to change, the characteristics of the social interactions which "trouble" the schema and stimulate equilibration, needs yet to be considered' (p. 233).

This seems to be an urgent task. For, in the absence of a specific study of the social interaction process—with its causes and its consequences not only postulated theoretically but also observed empirically—the danger of biological reductionism is great. Geber raises the question of ‘what it is in “social interaction” that is the critical element, or elements, in stimulating development’; but a little further on her tentative answer does not seem to avoid reducing the process to the status of a maturational consequence: ‘it may well be that the general maturation of the child’s information processing abilities, including memory and attention span, are the primate substrate on which social interaction is etched, but beyond this, understanding of the interaction process is limited’ (pp. 233–234).

It is quite probable that Piaget’s model itself is responsible for a tendency to reduce social development to a biological and psychological question. Piaget’s emphasis, when he presents his equilibration model of development, on the source of its dynamics *within* the individual, leads researchers easily into a consideration of the social environment as influencing this equilibration’s process, but not as generating it. The various social environments in which children grow up are viewed as providing ‘conditions under which the child lives’ (p. 212) and within which he constructs his world. But this recognition of environmental influences, similar to the conditions that environment or fertilizers provide for the growth of plants, does not further understanding of the mechanisms by which the developmental consequences appear. Geber presents interesting data illustrating how environments can differ in their structural features and in the nature of the personal interactions that they offer, but as she says, ‘the nature of the interaction and the structural features of the environment which influence it, are crucially part of what the child is assimilating, and to which he has to accommodate. And yet how minimal is our understanding of how the child constructs this reality and how it specifically influences him’ (pp. 219–220). The same type of preoccupation appears further on when Geber, dealing with research on role playing and cognitive development sees it ‘acting as a catalyst in developing the skills necessary for cognitive role—taking tasks’ (p. 236), but the present state of research cannot point out what are the crucial elements of role-taking responsible for it.

This concern with the modalities of environmental influences leads us to consider another important point made by Geber. After her analysis of the social learning and the cognitive approaches to decentration skills, moral judgements and prosocial behaviour, Geber suggests that the behaviours observed could ‘be seen as the result of the child’s interpretation of the demands which he is able to exhibit (p. 241). In this statement Geber refers to the social behaviours presented in the studies. But why should this statement—and its related demonstrations—apply only to social behaviour and not also to cognitive behaviour? For cognitive concepts too do not develop independently from cognitive behaviours (more generally referred to as ‘child’s activity’), are not constructed in a social vacuum, and could be elaborated to respond to certain social demands.

This hypothesis, applied both to the social and cognitive areas, could open the way to a consideration of social environments as differing not only in what they provide the child with (‘skill lexicons’ for instance, p. 213) but also as differing in the nature of the demands they put to the child; sociologists, in particular

would speak here of 'social norms'. The social psychologist would then have to study how the child develops in interaction with these demands. These would be approached not globally but in their specificity; the problem being not only to observe how the child understands these demands (interesting perspectives are reported by Geber on children's social concepts) but also to succeed in noting the impact of these demands on the child's development according to how he understands them.

Under which conditions are these demands conveying meaning to the child's activity? Are they directly inducing him to explore new areas of his physical and social environment? Are they requiring the child to adapt to conditions new to him? In other words are they sources of those disequilibria (and these would be the source of the dynamics of the equilibration model) that the child manages to master only thanks to the more advanced cognitive means that he then sets to elaborate?

How does the social construction of meaning take place? Several authors in Geber's book raise the question. But precautions must be taken to study this problem not only within a psychological perspective but also in a social one, if biological reductionism is to be avoided in the end.

In the case of the book by Christiane Vandenplas-Holper, the author offers here a broad review of experimental investigations in the field of the social development of the child which will be especially welcomed by her French speaking audience, as the works referred to are usually not available in French but dispersed in various specialized journals, mostly North American ones. Vandenplas-Holper is interested in analysing the convergences and divergences that appear within the theoretical frameworks and the data collected by two presently important currents in the study of the socialization of the child, the social learning approach and the cognitive developmental approach. She looks at their work in various now classic domains such as the importance of play—and especially of socio-dramatic play—for cognitive and emotional development, role-playing skills and the ability to decentre, moral development, and the growth of psychosexual attitudes and identity. This review will be a very valuable mine of information for all those interested in experimentation in these domains, which now have their own traditions. The author's intention is also to make these research findings available to educationalists concerned with the choice and elaboration of pedagogical methods. But as the author herself says at many points, there is a great risk of overgeneralization—or of reductionistic simplification—in trying to deduce practical outcomes directly from the results of laboratory investigation. If laboratory experiments are to be heuristic and justify the choice of certain educative methods, then given that the reality of the field is always more complex than the reality of the experiments, educationalists should still check systematically that the practices implemented do have the predicted outcomes and benefits. This precaution seems to have been taken in only very few of the research works reviewed, for most of them were conducted for psychological reasons and not pedagogical ones.

From this review there emerges a feeling of *convergence* between the two often opposed approaches in the study of the child's socialization; the social learning studies have always set the emphasis on the structuring effects of the environment, and the equilibration model of most of the developmental

cognitive theories has, to the contrary, viewed the individual's activity as the source of the structures described. Certainly something of a reconciliation has occurred to which Vandenplas-Holper refers in detail. But what type of convergence is appearing? Probably the convergence reported is mostly achieved on the *descriptive level* and it might still be hiding some epistemological divergences. Indeed data described by the two approaches are not generally incompatible, but why would they be? Are they not describing the same children in the same society? The two theories seem to have grown more complex in borrowing from each other different elements in order to describe the same complex reality; originally their interpretations were simpler but perhaps they were not carried out with the same scope. The social learning approach, in extending its preoccupations beyond learning problems to developmental ones, has integrated within its framework some constructivistic concepts and thrown light on the importance of the subject's activity. The cognitivist approach is now integrating experiments displaying the importance of social factors in the elaboration of cognitive constructs. To some extent Vandenplas-Holper suggests that an integrative socio-cognitive approach to development has emerged from these different traditions. Is this convergence going deeper than the descriptive level? There seems to be some confusion in the interpretation of the mechanisms responsible for the behaviours and attitudes described; of course, these theoretical and epistemological concerns have not usually been the central preoccupation of the researchers whose work Vandenplas-Holper analyses. On several occasions she is led to point out the inadequacies of these theoretical frameworks for explaining, for instance, the existence of different educative practices and attitudes in different social backgrounds, or the evolution of sex-role typing. The descriptive nature of these reported approaches is too limited to account for such differences. Vandenplas-Holper does call upon such authors as B. Bernstein to acknowledge the role of socio-economic and cultural factors, but, as is also clear from Geber's book, a real integration at this level is still to be done.

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