

Piaget, Jean (1896–1980)

Born on August 9, 1896, in Neuchâtel, Switzerland, Jean Piaget grew up among passionate intellectuals in a basically Protestant environment. At a very early age, he became interested in issues connected with natural science, philosophy, logic, metaphysics, and theology. After studying science and being awarded his doctorate in zoology in 1919 with a thesis on molluscs, he moved to psychology with the hope of developing new ways to study empirically the old philosophical question "What is knowledge?" To achieve this, he started exploring the world of childhood. He studied in Zurich and at ALFRED BINET's laboratory in Paris. In 1921, he was called to direct research at the Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute at the University of Geneva by Edouard Claparède and his former teacher Pierre Bovet. He was a professor of philosophy at the University of Neuchâtel from 1925 to 1929 before becoming a professor of the history of scientific thought at the University of Geneva, where he remained until his death in 1980.

Piaget played an important part in the thinking of the active school movements, and became involved in the foundation of the International Bureau of Education, of which he was the first director. His research inquiries during that period (1920–1936) bear on logic in the child's thought and moral judgment, and on the originality of child development in a non-adult-centered perspective. From 1936 onward, he began collaborating with other researchers, notably Bärbel Inhelder and Alina Szeminska, who contributed to the enrichment of his critical interview method and to the gathering of a very rich collection of empirical data on children's cognitive development in the main areas of thinking. Piaget developed a theoretical model characterized by its focus on the child's own activity in a search for equilibrium and by an attempt to formalize the structures underlying the cognitive functioning of observed children at given ages. He described four main developmental stages: sensori-motor, preoperationals, concrete operations, and formal operations.

From 1952 to 1963, Piaget also taught psychology, including the psychology of childhood, at the Sorbonne in Paris. During that time, his research moved to encompass a wider understanding of knowledge development. In 1955 he founded the International Center for Genetic Epistemology, an interdisciplinary meeting point where he could discuss, with specialists from all over the world, his main preoccupation: "How is knowledge possible?" He compared ideas and facts, the philosophy of science and the observation of children, working out the fundamental principles of genetic epistemology. He pursued his empirical research on the genesis of knowledge with collaborators who inventively multiplied the tasks to be presented to children, and he offered a general constructivist theory explaining the order in which, according to his observations, phenomena are understood.

According to Piaget, the first stage of development is *objectal*; that is, the young child concentrates on the supposed properties of objects and does not distinguish him- or herself from these objects. The next stage is *interobjectal* (the child is able to connect self, objects, and phenomena) and at the final stage, the child is able to think hypothetically and to go beyond the present appearance of objects, actions, and phenomena.

Jean Piaget was wary of any attempt to imprison the child's autonomous thinking with ready-made answers that would call on memory and docility rather than on intelligence and critical reflection. Piaget illustrated how knowledge is possible because learners actively strive for mastery and understanding. He offered evidence for a constructivist understanding of intelligence, that is, a view of cognitive development as not merely the fruit of biological maturation, or of simple cumulative self-experience, or of the direct interiorization of cultural transmissions, but an interplay of all of these different factors. Piaget's findings have become the basis for much research in teaching, cognitive psychology, remedial education, and socialization and have penetrated so deep into almost all higher education programs in education and psychology that they have become accepted as simply common sense for many.

See also: *Child Development, History of the Concept of Child Psychology.*

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INTERNET RESOURCE

The Jean Piaget Archives. Available from <www.unige.ch/piaget>.

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