Jean Piaget, PhD

Your Biography

You were born in 1896 in Switzerland to Arthur Piaget, a professor of medieval literature at Neuchâtel University. You write, late in life, that you Mother's poor mental health 'intensly interested' in questions of psychology and psychoanalysis. This interest did not manifest at first, however, as your first passion was natural history. Many commentators have asserted this interest was born of an aversion to anything fantastical or hallucinatory. At the age of 11, you started to work with Paul Godet, Director of the Natural History Museum at Neuchâtel, on molluscs. This work was so successful that when you were only 15, Maurice Bedot, director of the Natural History Museum at Geneva, offered you a position as an assistant in malacology. You declined, explaining that you were too young.

You went to the University of Neuchâtel to study natural sciences, but happened upon a series of lectures by Carl Jung while spending a semester at the University of Zurich. After completing your Doctorate, you took a job teaching at a boy's school in France established by the psychologist Alfred Binet. It was there that you began seriously investigating child development.

Given your training and interest in natural science, you approached the problem of developmental psychology experimentally, testing the problem-solving skills of children of different ages. You concluded, after much observation, that the thinking structures of children differ from adults, and develop during different stages of the child's development. That basic idea is core to all your theories of psychology.

You returned to Switzerland in 1921 as Director of the Rousseau Institute in Geneva. You married Valentie Châtenay in 1923, with whom you had three children: Jacqueline, Lucienne and Laurent.

By carefully interviewing them (in a quasi-clinical setting) while they tried to solve problems you had set up, you developed your idea of 'genetic epistemology,' reflecting your emphasis on the origin of knowledge in development. You theorize that the human mind has certain cognitive structures that correspond to different stages of development: sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational. Contrary to the behaviorists, you do not believe that all learning is a matter of conditioning. But at the same time, contrary to Descartes and the Port-Royalists, you don't believe it is innate either.

According to you, children understands his or her world by adapting to new conditions and information using two basic ways: assimilation and accommodation. 'Assimilation' refers to the child's ability to fit current experiences into an existing conceptual structure, and 'accommodation' when the child has to create a new conceptual structure to understand new information. Understanding the psychology of a child, or a person, requires that we understand the cognitive structures he or she uses to understand his or her world.

Your view provides something of a counterpoint to the Freudian view of child development. While you both hold that the child psychology develops through a series of stages, you do not

believe that the cognitive structures found in an adult would be found in a child. It follows then that even if children engage in behaviors that adults would understand in a certain way (say, sexually), it does not mean that the child understands those behaviors in the same way.[1] In fact, while you believe that psychoanalysis will not progress as a science until it unified its methodology to something more scientific (Freud never studied any actual children, for example), your main criticisms center around Freud's version of the genetic hypothesis. You share that criticism, of course, with Carl Jung.

Game Objectives

You are something of an independent on most of the issues that come before the APA. At this point in your career, you are an old man, considered to be one of the greats in the history of psychology. On the other hand, the first behaviorist revolution saw members of your generation as the enemy. You are sympathetic to those challenging behaviorism, including the cognitivists. But you're also deeply concerned about the scientific validity of psychoanalysis.

Your specific task in this game is to engage the new revolutionaries—Chomsky in particular—in a public discussion or debate of the concept of 'innateness' in psychology, and the acceptability of positing innate ideas in a scientific enterprise. You should propose the event to the conference committee in time for it to happen in 1975.

As you will remember, the problem of innate ideas strikes the very core of the idea of the scientific study of the mind: the empirical hypothesis unifies the tradition as a whole, with the exception of Jungians. Moreover, the debate on homosexuality often turns, in the public mind at the least, on whether sexuality is innate (an 'orientation') or not (a 'preference'). The kind of innateness you and Chomsky are discussing is probably *not* the same, as you both agree that the *structure* of thought that is innate, not the content. This should be made clear in your public discussion.

Chomsky posits that the there is a innate system of grammars that are common to all humans, as a function of our biology. You believe there is a 'fixed nucleaus' of cognition that is innate, but say that “the functioning of intelligence alone is hereditary.” The actual debate is recorded in Piatelli-Palmarini's 1980 book, which you should review during the course of the game.

You are neutral on **the issue of the definition of mental illness**.

Must Read

Piatelli-Palmarini, M. (Ed.) (1980). *Language and Learning: The Debate between Jean Piaget and Noam Chomsky*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul . Reviewed at: http://journals.cambridge.org/action/displayAbstract?fromPage=online&aid=5843312

Piaget, J. (1924). *Judgment and reasoning in the child*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1928. available at http://www.archive.org/details/judgmentandreaso007972mbp

Piaget, J. (1936). *Origins of intelligence in the child*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1953.

Piaget, J. (1957). *Construction of reality in the child*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1954.

Piaget, J. (1941). *Child's conception of number* (with Alina Szeminska), London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952.

Piaget, J. (1945). *Play, dreams and imitation in childhood*, London: Heinemann, 1951.

Secondary Source

Litowitz, B.E. (1999). "Freud and Piaget: une fois de plus" *The Genetic Epistemologist* 27(4). Available at http://www.piaget.org/GE/1999/GE-27-4.html#article1

Sheehy, N. (2004). Fifty Key Thinkers in Psychology. New York: Routledge. Pages 188-193.

[1] See Litowitz, B.E. (1999) for a full discussion.