

## Comparison of Child Development Theorists: Piaget and Vygotsky

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## **Introduction**

This essay aims to compare two of the most influential theorists in child development studies, namely Piaget and Lev Vygotsky. The report begins with explanation of child development theory of Piaget and its criticisms and then continues to analyse how Vygotsky critiqued Piaget and developed his own theoretical arguments. The essay then presents a comprehensive conclusion in the form of comparison between the two theorists.

## **Child Development Theory Of Piaget**

There is a profound impact that Piaget had on the concept of child development in modern society. Before Piaget children were considered to be passive beings that can be moulded and shaped through effective interventions in the environment. However, Piaget argued that children behave similar to scientists who interpret the world around them. They employ own logic and they ways to gain knowledge that in turn affects their behaviour and actions. Piaget argued that there are predictable patterns that children follow in their development to maturity which can be studies through their interaction in the society (Runco, 2014). They develop mental representations of interactions with the environment and manifest reciprocal interaction. This implies that children actively gain knowledge by interaction with surrounding and then apply own logic and they evolve mental functions over time that affect their behaviours. Piaget was one of the first theorists of constructivism in Psychology (Kail, 2015).

## ***Cognitive stages***

Piaget was a phase theorist who divided cognitive development into four major stages: sensory-motor stage, preoperational stage, stage of concrete operations and stage of formal operations, each of which represents the transition to a more complex and abstract form of know. At each stage it is assumed that the child's thinking is qualitatively different from the others (Fast, et al., 2013). Piaget postulated that cognitive development is a combination of qualitative changes in abilities and facts and it determines the organisation of knowledge and its impact on behaviour. When a child enters new developmental stage, he/she stops using forms of functioning or reasoning in previous stage. Therefore it is possible to develop a sequence of steps that shows cognitive development in a child. He also concluded that this sequence is applicable on all children and every child goes through same processes in development phase to maturity (Demetriou, Shayer, and Efklides, 2016).

***Development as change of knowledge structures***

Piaget argued that every person which includes children starts organising knowledge gained from environment in the form of what he called schemes. A scheme is a set of mental operations, physical actions, theories or concepts through which a person acquires and organize information around the surroundings (Hart, 2013). A child gains knowledge about the world from his actions conducts and behaviour but mature persons rather use mental operations. The a child advances from one developmental phase to another As the child goes through the stages, he improves the ability to more abstract and complex schemes and the way knowledge is organised is changed. Cognitive development does not consist only in building new schemes, but in reorganizing and differentiating existing ones (Hart, 2013).

Piaget's theory of cognitive development is one of the most cited and controversial. Piaget contributed to change the direction of research devoted to child development. Once researchers began to study development through this perspective, they could no longer see the child as a passive organism conditioned and shaped by the environment (Demetriou, Shayer, and Efklides, 2016). Although these works continued to influence the way of thinking of the child, in recent years his theory has provoked strong controversies and criticism. Among other things, the following is criticized (Fast, et al., 2013):

- a) the research methods;
- b) the gradual nature of the child's thinking;
- c) the suitability of equilibrium models to explain evolutionary changes;
- d) the universality of the Piagetian stages.

Many contemporary theorists think that Piaget underestimated the abilities of young children. The tasks he used were very complicated and demanded great cognitive ability; even many of them required complex verbal skills. Critics point out that the child may have the ability to solve problems at higher cognitive levels, only that he lacks the verbal skills to demonstrate his competence. Thus, when non-verbal measures are used to prove the presence or absence of the basic concepts, the results differ from Piaget's (Kail, 2015). Piaget has been criticized mainly for his ideas concerning the qualitative nature of cognitive development. Some theorists question

whether changes in the cognitive systems of the child are as fundamental, decisive, qualitative and gradual as he proposed. They have also pointed out that the equilibrium model fails to satisfactorily explain the progress in cognitive development. The cognitive activities that take place during the process of assimilation, accommodation and equilibrium are also not explicitly mentioned (Runco, 2014).

### **Child Development Theory Of De Vygotsky**

Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) was a prominent representative of Russian psychology. He proposed a theory of child development that reflects the enormous influence of the historical events of his time. After the triumph of the October Revolution of 1917, the leaders of the new Soviet society highlighted the influence of each individual in the transformation of society through work and education (van Rijk, et al. 2017). Vygotsky formulated a psychological theory that corresponded to the new situation of the country. His theory highlights the relationships of the individual with society. He affirmed that it is not possible to understand the development of the child if the culture where he is raised is not known (Daniels, 2016).

Vygotsky is considered one of the first critics of the Piagetian theory of cognitive development. In his perspective, knowledge is not built individually as proposed by Piaget, but is co-constructed between people and surroundings. Children gain knowledge from interactions with peers and adults and use it for intellectual development (Crain, 2015). According to Vygotsky, knowledge is located neither in the child nor in the environment. Rather, it is located within a specific cultural or social context. In other words, he believed that the mental processes of the individual such as memorising, problem solving or planning have a social origin (Saxe and de Kirby, 2014).

According to Vygotsky, there is elementary knowledge in child at birth having physical abilities, and mental abilities such as attention perception, and memory. Then the interactions with peers and adults, superior mental functions are developed in the child (Stetsenko and Arieivitch, 2014). More specifically, Vygotsky thought that cognitive development consists of internalizing functions that occur earlier in what he called the social plane (Stetsenko and Arieivitch, 2014).

***Mental functions***

Vygotsky defined two types of mental functions: higher and lower. Children born with lower mental functions as they are genetically determined natural functions. These functions derive limited behaviours. Children acquire higher mental functions by social interactions. The societal culture affects higher mental functions, therefore they are culturally mediated (Crain, W., 2015). Higher mental functions derive unlimited behaviours as they are based on knowledge derived from social interaction. As the knowledge increases the behaviour continue to go changes constantly and mental functions grow stronger (Daniels, 2016). According to this perspective, the human being is first and foremost a cultural being and this is what establishes the difference between the human being and other types of living beings, including primates. The central point of this distinction between lower and higher mental functions is that the individual does not relate only directly to his environment, but also through and through interaction with other individuals (Crain, 2015).

***Psychological skills***

Vygotsky argued that psychological abilities are manifested within social sphere as well as in individual sphere. When a child cries because something hurts, he expresses pain and this expression is only a lower mental function, it is a reaction to the environment (Stetsenko and Arievitch, 2014). When the child cries to attract attention it is already a form of communication, but this communication only occurs in the interaction with others. At that time, it is already a superior interpsychological mental function, because it is only possible as communication with others (van Rijk, et al., 2017).

***Thought tools***

In a similar way to Piaget's conception, Vygotsky defined cognitive development in terms of qualitative changes in thought processes. Only that he described them from the technical and psychological tools that children use to interpret their world. In general, the former serve to modify objects or dominate the environment; the second, to organize or control thought and behaviour (Daniels, 2016).

***Language and development***

For Vygotsky, language is the psychological tool that most influences cognitive development. In this regard he stated that the intellectual development of the child is based on the domain of the social environment of thought, that is, language. Distinguishes three stages in

the use of language: the social stage, the egocentric and the internal speech (Crain, 2015). In the first stage, the social speech, the child uses the language fundamentally communicate. Thought and language fulfill independent functions. The child begins the next stage, self-centered speech, when he begins to use speech to regulate his behavior and thinking. Speak out loud to yourself when you perform some tasks. Since he does not try to communicate with others, these self-verbalizations are considered a private speech, not a social speech (Daniels, 2016). At this stage of development, speech begins to play an intellectual and communicative function. Children internalize egocentric speech in the last stage of speech development, that of internal speech. They use it to direct their thinking and behavior. In this phase, they can reflect on the solution of problems and the sequence of actions manipulating the language "in their head" (Saxe and de Kirby, 2014).

### **Conclusion: Comparison between The Theory Of Piaget And The De Vygotsky**

The basic assumptions of Piaget's theory and that of Vygotsky show important differences. Both agree that children build knowledge mentally, but Vygotsky puts more importance to social interactions in knowledge development than Piaget. Vygotsky argues that knowledge construction cannot be an individual process (Saxe and de Kirby, 2014). Rather it is fundamentally a social process in which higher mental functions are the product of an activity mediated by society. The main means of cognitive change are collaborative learning problem solving (Runco, 2014).

Vygotsky thinks that culture contributes decisively to shaping cognitive development. The child as he matures learns to use the tools of thought that his culture appreciates a lot (Stetsenko and Arievitch, 2014). There are no universal patterns of development, as cultures give priority to different kinds of tools, of intellectual abilities of social conventions. The intellectual skills necessary to survive in a high-tech society will be different from those required in a predominantly agrarian society (Fast, et al., 2013).

Another important difference between Piaget's ideas and those of Vygotsky is the importance they attach to learning. We have seen that for Piaget cognitive development limits what children can learn from social experiences (Crain, 2015). Learning experiences do not necessarily accelerate this process. Although Vygotsky admits development and learning are

different, he argued that latter is an essential element of the process of acquisition of human-like psychological and culturally organized functions (Hart, 2013). Vygotsky thought that instruction (both formal and informal) by peers or more knowledgeable adults is the basis of cognitive development. For him, learning precedes development.

In addition, Vygotsky's proximal development zone offers a very different perspective of maturity than that of Piaget's theory. In the latter, maturity for learning is defined by the level of competence and knowledge of the child. If a teacher tries to teach him a concept or operation before he is mentally ready, what Piaget calls "empty learning" will occur (van Rijk, et al., 2017). On the contrary, Vygotsky (1978) stated that instruction should focus on the potential level of development, that is, on the competence that the child demonstrates with the help of the supervision of others. In this regard he says: The only good learning is that which anticipates the development of the student (Demetriou, Shayer, and Efklides, 2016).

Finally, Vygotsky and Piaget had totally different opinions about the role that language plays in development. In Piaget's theory, the egocentric speech of young children shows their inability to adopt the perspective of others. It does not fulfill a useful function in its development. The processes of thinking arise from the actions with which he manipulates objects, not from his speech (Daniels, 2016). For his part, Vygotsky thought that egocentric speech represents an evolutionary phenomenon of great transcendence. Self-centered speech helps children organize and regulate their thinking. When children talk to themselves, they are trying to solve problems and think on their own (Crain, 2015). Self-centered speech, or private speech, would be the means by which they make the important transition from being controlled by others to (regulation by others) being controlled by their own thought processes (self-regulated). Egocentric speech plays a role both intellectual and self-regulating in the young child (Daniels, 2016).

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