

A critical discussion on moral development in children comparing both sociocultural and cognitive theories.

In this essay we look at moral development in children using Piaget's cognitive theory and Turiel's theory of Socio-cultural approaches via a critical discussion on moral development in children comparing both sociocultural and cognitive theories. We look at the theories from both sides of the debate to try and find a way that these theories are commonly linked. Piaget started the debate some time ago, but because he was the first to comment, does that make him correct in his hypothesis, and how limiting is his perspective, if at all.

Piaget's theory of infant cognition and moral development in children is thought of as being the brain child of Jean Piaget (1896-1980). Piaget began his studies studying philosophy and scientific methodology, he had a great interest in biology and how organisms adapted to their environment. At the some may say precocious age of 11 years old (Harris & Butterworth, 2002) he published his first paper "On sighting an albino sparrow" (Harris and Butterworth, 2002) He went on to study Biology and Philosophy at university, then moved to Zurich to study experimental psychology. Whilst there he attended lectures given by psychoanalysts such as Jung and others, whilst studying the work of Sigmund Freud.

After these studies he went on to study experimental studies of children, based on the previous work of Binet, but heavily influenced by the work of Sigmund Freud as psychoanalytical theory had by now been accepted within the academic community (Harris & Butterworth, 2002) James Mark Baldwin was in exile in Paris at the time. Therefore Paul Harris (1997) cited by (Harris & Butterworth, 2002) argued the idea that Piaget would have been greatly influenced by Baldwin, Binet and Freud.

Binet in particular is claimed to have made an important contribution to Piaget's theory about the way that children's thinking develops over time. Piaget got together with Simon - Binet's collaborator who invited him to use Binet's laboratory, where he developed his method of asking children probing questions to understand what and how they understood things. Piaget (Harris & Buttler, 2002) was particularly interested in the errors that these children made, and the possibility that these may be explained as internally consistent as opposed to random. Piaget went on to spend the rest of his life developing his theory of how knowledge is acquired, this he went on to call "genetic epistemology" He later went on to marry Valentine Chatenay in 1923 and in collaboration, which sounds somewhat inhumane, they went on to study the development from birth of their own three children, these observations of origins of thought and language went on to be the basis of three of Piaget's books, *The Origins of Intelligence in Children* (1936/1952), *The Construction of Reality in the Child* (1937/1957), and *Play Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (1945/1962) cited by (Harris & Buttler, 2002)

In a later book *Biology and Knowledge* (1971) he outlined his theory of a relation between evolution and the acquisition of a child's knowledge as being a biological process, and drew parallels between evolution theory and developmental theory, claiming that acquiring knowledge is an evolutionary process because knowledge is adaptive, meaning that better knowledge allows a child to deal with their environment more effectively.

Piaget believed that the moral development of intelligence and reasoning in children came from their biological roots, Piaget's description of developing mental powers of the child has inspired many followers, who developed their own versions of his work on Cognitive Development – Piaget theory – Kohlberg theory – Gilligan 2 different moral orientations, however a major opponent of his, Lev Semeonovich Vygotsky (1896-1934) cited by (Harris & Buttler, 2002) believed that culture influences the course of a child's development.

Vygotsky also had great influence in shaping developmental psychology in a more socio-cultural way, but unfortunately because he died at the age of 38 and was from Moscow, meant his work wasn't seen for years after his death by the west. He taught literature and psychology in Gomel, and his work was finally published in his book *The Psychology of Art* (Vygotsky, 1971) cited by (Harris & Buttler, 2002). His view that culture and social organisation, plus the historical forces that shape society, which were very much of the time in the Marxist theory. They had had an important influence on the development of a child's mind, although Stalin wasn't a supporter of his work and it was suppressed in Russia, and then his early death of tuberculosis meant very few knew of his work. However some of his students and colleagues managed to get some of his work printed in 1962 when his book *Thought and Language* was translated into English. Vygotskian theory argues that historical and social aspects of human behaviour make us unique, it doesn't claim that Piaget is wrong with his biological process theory of moral development, just that it is only part of the process of development. Vygotsky therefore, had a formative role of culture on the development of the thinker and how talking and language is the best form of learning. In Vygotskian theory, acquisition of language leads to the development of thinking, as opposed to Piaget's biological theory. Vygotski was less concerned about fixed stages of development than Piaget. Vygotsky's theories were loosely based on those on western psychology, and had read the work of James Mark Baldwin and his theory of development, and as he could speak French was acquainted with the work of Binet and Piaget, and is said to have critiqued some of Piaget's reinterpretation of psychoanalytic ideas in developmental terms (P.L. Harris, 1997) cited by (Harris & Buttler, 2002).

John Bowlby (1907-1990) was more concerned with the emotional development and formation of personality in a child, as opposed to Piaget and Vygotski's concern for intellectual development (Harris & Buttler, 2002). Bowlby's ideas were based on an eclectic mix of various developmental disciplines, but mainly Freudian psychoanalytic theory (Harris & Buttler, 2002). He had worked in a school for maladjusted children, and believed that problems of some severely disturbed children might be explained as being a result of faulty relationships between parents and children, which one may say is very Freudian. He became a child psychoanalyst and worked at the London Child Guidance Clinic in the 1930's drawing from Freudian traditions. The main part of Bowlby's theory was to explain the formation of the earliest attachment bonds between an infant and its mother (Harris & Buttler, 2002).

Lawrence Kohlberg (1973) took Piaget's theory further, by agreeing with his developmental stages of moral development, but taking them further, and not restricting them to age limits, one may say a bit more general in his approach, but he was a believer in the theory that stages last into adulthood, he called these directed, sequential, qualitative transformations in psychological structure (Kohlberg, 1973).

Socio-cultural approaches – cultural differences - Socio-cultural theory – Turiel (1983) moral and conventional rules -cultural differences - Schweder

Elliot Turiel (1983) had a different theory on moral development through social culture, he considered morality to be universalizable, meaning it could be recognized by anyone, and are relative to the persons social culture. He challenged Piaget and Kohlberg's theory that we evolve in fixed steps, more personal experience. This concept was embraced by Shweder, et al, (1987) who agreed that there is a distinction between morality and convention across cultures, believing that there are socially valid moral codes. In his book *The Development of Social Knowledge: Morality and Convention* (1983) Elliot Turiel claims that "*Children are not simply moulded by the environment: through constant interference and interpretation, they actively shape their own social world*" which actually takes into consideration social factors like family, social status, culture etc, He claims that a parent-child relationship is multifaceted, along with processes of thought and emotions, and that we also need to take into consideration the perspectives of the child and how and why they interpret parental directives and actions (Turiel, 2010) he called this a "*Bidirectional, reciprocal process of social interactions*" meaning that future research needs to look at the thoughts, emotions, and actions involved in parenting theory.

Richard A Shweder (1979) an American cultural anthropologist and figure in cultural psychology cited by (Lipman & Kennard, 1992) is of a similar view to Turiel. In his book *Thinking through cultures* (1992) claims that its central theme is to understand the ways a person's culture and natures make each other up,

his goal is to “*the mind indissociably embedded in the meanings and resonances that are both its product and component*” Shweder (1979) claims that the person as a category has disappeared from ethnography, and he wants to reverse this trend by searching for the meaning and creation of intentional worlds. To abandon the assumptions that everything is glued together, and to entertain the theory that actually nothing is glued together until proved otherwise, which blows the whole argument open, and questions Piagetian theory in its entirety.

So moral development through the eyes of cognitive theorists is thought of as progress in stages, Piaget believed these were in a biological context of stages of moral development, being: Premoral 0-5 years, Moral realism 5-10 years, and Moral relativism 10 years upwards (Harris & Butterworth, 2002) not really explaining adolescence or adulthood, whereas Kohlberg’s cognitive-developmental theory of moral reasoning used 3 levels being level 1 Preconventional morality, level 2 Conventional morality, and level 3 Postconventional morality, which intern moves into 6 stages, being 1 Punishment and obedience, 2 Rewards, 3 Good intentions, 4 Obedience to authority, 5 Difference between moral and legal right, and 6 Individual principles of conscience. (Harris & Butterworth, 2002) this gives a bit more scope in his stages and doesn’t restrict them to certain ages. But this could be viewed still as a restrictive view of compliance, what if you do not comply at the right time or in the right order, and who is to say that western culture uses the same schedule as eastern culture? This restrictive thinking was questioned by Carol Gilligan (1982), an American feminist, ethicist and psychologist, who pointed out that Piaget’s research was very much male based, and then went on to do her own female-based research, thus creating the same problem that she had brought up in the first place, but still highlighting the point.

Much contemporary research has shown that babies are much more competent than Piaget had assumed (Harris & Butterworth, 2002) also criticise Piaget’s idea that all knowledge can be fitted into one stage theory.

It would appear quite obvious that one’s culture, family and background has much more influence than a particular stage of a fictitious evolutionary process, fundamentally who we are must equate to who we are with, what we believe in, and what our society, chosen or not thinks we should believe, for instance religion and fanatic Islamists, these people are controlled by what they are told to believe in by indoctrination of someone else’s ideals. One doesn’t hit level 5 for instance and just become a terrorist.

Bergman (2002) sums it up well in his journal “*Why Be Moral? A Conceptual Model from Developmental Psychology*” after reviewing the work of Piaget, Kohlberg, Rest Colby, Damon, and Blasi, concluded “*Because that is who I am!*” or “*Because I can do no other and remain the person I am*”

One may argue that both Cognitive theory and Socio-cultural theory originate from the initial works of Sigmund Freud, Piaget studied his work, and they both liked to talk about stages of development, and who is to say that Vygotski hadn’t studied Freud? as his ideas were not greatly dis-similar to Freud’s view of the id, ego, and superego. The id being about self-preservation regardless of the consequences, the Superego being the moral base that makes decisions based on the environment. Freud believed that if a child can repress the id and let the superego develop, then moral development will follow in order to be accepted by society (HQ, 2018).

So to conclude can we not argue that in fact Freudian Psychoanalytic theory covers the arguments of different biological and socio-cultural moral development. We are bespoke complicated bundles of ego and emotions with an equal amount of biological and learnt behaviour, our experience shapes our lives in individual ways, which is what makes us unique individual humans.

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