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## Culture Wars

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## **A Student's Construction of Piaget**

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I have been studying Piagetian theory for about five years. Starting with my undergraduate studies and continuing through my graduate program, I have attempted to understand both the theory and its implications for education. I have read books by Piaget and about Piaget, attended courses which partially dealt with his ideas and courses which focused entirely on his theories. I have administered some of the Piagetian tasks to children and assisted with a research project very much grounded in Piagetian theory. Now, as a university professor, I am teaching a course which explores the possible applications of Piagetian theory to education.

This sketchy biographical statement has been presented in order to convey a feeling for my pursuit of an understanding of Piaget's ideas. After five years of trying to understand, what can I say about where I am in that endeavor? First, I am still trying, possibly more so than ever. But, more importantly, I have come to realize some things about the process of understanding itself, and along with that, begun to develop a deeper understanding of Piagetian theory.

Recently I read a book which discusses the relationship between Piagetian principles of development and educational practice. As I was reading about various Piagetian concepts, all of which I had read about many times before, it seemed that all the information was new. This caused me to reflect on other occasions when I have re-read something written by Piaget, and have had the feeling that I had not read it before, despite my written comments in the margins. When this happened I would worry about my poor memory and wonder where my attention had been while I was doing the reading. However, as I was reading this last book, I came to realize that my attention span and long-term memory were not in question. Given the fact that I am at a different stage of understanding Piagetian theory,

the material that I was re-reading was new.

The process of cognitive growth entails a reorganization of structures of knowledge. The direction of cognitive growth is towards a more complex and coordinated organization of the individual's relationship to an understanding of reality. At each stage of development, these structures, in a sense, determine how the individual conceives of the way in which the world works. For me,  $E = mc^2$  means one thing; to a physicist it means something else. In each case, the individual's structures of knowledge give reality meaning.

The books that I have read and the experiences I have had do not accumulate in an additive fashion, so that book A plus book B produces a greater whole which can be broken back down into its constituent parts. On the contrary, after reading the second book, my understanding of the first has changed qualitatively. My knowledge had been transformed and reorganized. As I reflected on this process, I began to consider the relationship of continuity and discontinuity. If I were to construct a timeline of the past five years noting on it the books read, lectures attended, etc., and marked the endpoint as "my understanding of Piagetian theory today," the points on that line are at the same time discrete elements and parts of a continuum, same as the inch marks on a ruler. This co-ordination of continuity with discontinuity plays an important part in cognitive development. According to Piaget, the stages of development are identifiable, yet cumulative. The preoperational child who answers that there is more water in the tall, thin beaker does so because he is centering on static states. The concrete operational child conserves because he takes into consideration the transformations of materials, the continuity within discontinuity. Class inclusion demands a consideration of the part and the whole at the same time. Again, the relationship of discontinuity to continuity.

Various authors call the preoperational child's view of how the world works, a deformation of reality.

The preoperational structures of knowledge assign meaning to reality which is not completely consistent with how reality operates. It is true that at times things which "look like more" do in fact contain greater amounts. However, this is not always the case.

I realize now that during the process of trying to understand Piaget's theory, the process of assigning meaning to it, I was no doubt "guilty" of similar deformations. I first began reading Piaget and took his theory as proof necessary to support a romantic notion of the education of children. I did so because I had been very much involved with the ideas of such writers as Holt, Kohl and Herndon. I "re-shaped" Piaget a bit so that I could fit his ideas into a larger scheme. However, even though I deformed the environmental input, the very same input forced me to accommodate--re-organize--my thoughts, and that is the crucial dynamic process of cognitive growth. "A" allows "B" to be assimilated (or A assigns meaning to B), but "B" forces "A" to make some accommodations, and neither one will ever be the same again.

Very often, after I finish reading something by or about Piaget, someone will ask me to comment on the quality of the book or article. I find myself answering, "It's hard for me to say because I am not reacting to it as a book in isolation. I bring with me to the reading all that I have read and experienced before. I don't know how good it is for someone just beginning to read Piaget." Now I realize what I have meant by that statement. After taking a course in art history, our appreciation for works of art can never be the same. The structures we have for knowing have been qualitatively changed. The reading of a biography of DaVinci will cause the viewer to look at the Mona Lisa differently. In the same sense, the preoperational child moving into the concrete operational stage, will never "see" the pouring of water in the same way again.

What has this self-analysis taught me? I have come to a fuller understanding of certain Piagetian concepts and the process which incorporates those

ideas. That process is what Piaget has called the construction of reality, and I have borrowed that phrase to create the title of this paper. I have come to realize that I was and always have been Piaget's child.