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Culture and Development in Our Poststructural Age

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This year's Minnesota Symposium, which takes place in the thick of the revival of "cultural psychology" as a discipline (see e.g., Bruner, 1990; Cole, 1996; D'Andrade, 1995; Goodnow, Miller, & Kessel, 1995; Greenfield, 1997; Jessor, Colby, & Shweder, 1996; Markus, Kitayama, & Heiman, 1997; Miller, 1997; Much, 1992; Rogoff, 1990; Shore, 1996; Shweder, 1991, 1993; Shweder & Sullivan, 1993; Shweder, Goodnow, Hatano, LeVine, Markus, & Miller, 1997; Sigler, Shweder, & Herdt, 1991; Wierzbicka, 1991, 1992), is about "Cultural Processes of Child Development." My aim in this chapter is to locate this year's symposium in an historical context by telling a story about some of the major changes that have taken place over the past 30 years in our picture of mental development. I take account of the current interest in cultural processes of child development by drawing a contrast between the once fashionable structural (primarily Piagetian) picture of mental development (which left rather little intellectual space for the study of cultural psychology) and various pictures of mental development from out of our current poststructural age (which make room for almost everything, including culture).

PIAGET'S GRAND STRUCTURAL PICTURE OF MENTAL DEVELOPMENT

In 1966, when I entered graduate school in the Department of Social Relations at Harvard University, the mind and spirit of Jean Piaget was a vibrant presence in the

of cognitive development was the rage in most leading centers of developmental psychology in the United States (see Piaget, 1954, 1967, 1970). Here is the version of Piaget's theory that was current and quickly passed on to students in those days.

For one thing it was emphasized that Piaget studied *cognitive* development. Although the relevant contrast set was often left a bit vague (cognition versus what? Behavior? Conation? Emotion? Nonrepresentational thought?) it was made relatively clear to us by our teachers that the fact that Piaget studied *cognitive* development meant at least these two things: (a) that he studied the mind of the child the way one might study the mind of an ideal scientist or a logician, and (b) that from a Piagetian perspective growth or development had something to do with endorsing true propositions.

The study of cognitive development was thereby differentiated from the study of development in noncognitive domains, such as emotional development or the development of moral character. In those noncognitive domains, we were told, development did not amount to endorsing true propositions but rather amounted instead to actually doing what is right or good (as in the case of having moral character) or amounted to actually experiencing appropriate feelings and desires in various kinds of social situations (as in the case of being emotionally competent or mature). Feeling, desire, and moral commitment were thus placed outside the territory of the cognitive domain, whereas scientific, logical, and propositional reasoning were placed securely within the field of cognitive studies.

We learned that Piaget studied the development of scientific and logical capacities in the child by carefully observing children striving to figure out what causes what, striving for consistency among ideas, striving to build up or construct for themselves a set of principles (e.g., the logic of inductive science and experimental reasoning, the idea of necessary truths) for regulating their own thought and for avoiding intellectual mistakes. Heroic images were presented to us of Piaget on a kind of researcher's Odyssey to the most unlikely of places in his quest for a grand all-encompassing theory of mental development—images of Piaget playing marbles with children in the playground, of Piaget as the assiduous chronicler of the sucking behavior of infants in the nursery.

We were told that Piaget had traced the ontogenetic history of children's scientific and logical understandings through four self-constructed stages: the sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete operational, and formal operational stages. At each stage new mental structures were said to emerge: the idea of an object during the sensorimotor stage, the idea of reversibility and transitivity during the concrete operational stage. Thus, for example, a preoperational 4-year-old was supposed to lack the requisite mental structures for constructing the perspective of others as evidenced by the fol-

lowing type of interview (reported by Peter Wason) with a 4-year-old: "Do you have a brother?" "Yes." "What's his name?" "Jim." "Does Jim have a brother?" "No."

In 1966, when I entered graduate school, psychology in America had long since lost its institutional connection to philosophy. Perhaps that is why no one bothered to point out to us that the core ideas examined by Piaget (number, object, cause, space, time, morality) were more or less the same ideas identified by Immanuel Kant as synthetic *a priori* truths and as the necessary preconditions of empiricism, for without some *a priori* idea of number, object, cause, space, and time the very notion of "having an experience" (the supposed source of all knowledge for empiricists) makes no sense. Perhaps that is why no one bothered to boggle our minds and disrupt the Piagetian developmental story by asking "how is it possible for a young infant to experience anything at all (including your experimental manipulation) if he or she does not already have at hand (or in its mouth) the ideas that Piaget says are not available until 18 months, or 6-years-of-age, or what have you?"

What we did learn was that according to Piagetian theory immature thinking (in contrast to mature thinking) was characterized by a cluster of correlated attributes. Immature thinking was supposed to be undifferentiated (vs. differentiated), concrete (vs. abstract), egocentric or subject-dependent (vs. impersonal or objective), context-bound (vs. context-free), inconsistent (vs. consistent), incomplete (vs. complete), intuitive (vs. reflective), implicit (vs. explicit), complexive, associative, or functional (vs. taxonomic), percept-driven (vs. concept-driven), animistic (vs. causal), temporal (vs. logical), affective in tone and concrete in its imagery. Young children were said to be unaware of any perspective but their own. They were said to be unable to distinguish a word or name from its referent, unable to know the difference between objectivity and subjectivity.

Moreover a kind of master developmental narrative got built up, in which the French Enlightenment's opposition between religion—superstition—irrationality versus logic—science—rationality was used to tell a story, indeed the very same story, about the difference between children versus adults, about the difference between primitive peoples versus civilized peoples, and about the difference between premodern peoples in the West (e.g., people in the dark ages) and modern peoples in the West (peoples who benefited from the French Enlightenment).

The basic theme of the narrative, which was sometimes explicit and sometimes covert, went like this: In contrast to mature thinkers or the enlightened elite (we presumed that meant us), all those "others" (children, contemporary primitive peoples, and historical peoples from the premodern period in the West) are relatively confused or undifferentiated about a lot of things. They are confused about the relationship of language

to reality (for example, they believe in "word magic" or the idea that symbols are part of the reality they describe). They are confused about the relationship of the moral order to the natural world (e.g., they believe in "immanent justice" or the idea that suffering is punishment for your sins). They are confused about the relationship of the social order to the natural world (e.g., they tend to think that their duties, obligations, and social roles are objective emanations or have been handed down by God). And so forth.

PICTURES OF MENTAL DEVELOPMENT FROM OUT OF OUR POSTSTRUCTURAL AGE

Before going any further in the telling of this tale I want to confess that I am of the opinion that any American psychologist who is unfeigned in his or her assessment of the recent history of child development studies must admit that interest in that Piagetian picture of mental development had largely waned by the early 1980s and that today, at least in the United States among developmental psychologists, Piaget's research agenda is now more or less moribund. It is not even clear that his spirit lives on, although knowledge of some standardized and watered down version of his stage theory may still be required to pass a licensing exam in child psychiatry in some states or an introductory psychology test at some university.

Today, rightly or wrongly, at most leading centers of cognitive developmental psychology in the United States, students are told a different story. The story they are told is out of a poststructural age. Perhaps it is the master narrative of an age that is suspicious of all master narratives and totalizing world views and does not worry quite so much as did Piaget about the role of self-monitoring, rational justification, and contradiction in fostering conceptual (and behavioral) change. Piaget was a modernist and we live in a postmodern age.

The current poststructural story has many themes and no one has integrated them into a single plot (which may be part of the point of the story) but some of the themes go something like this:

1. The mind is not a structured whole. If we examine the actual cognitive functioning of individuals across a series of tasks we discover that no single operational level is a generalized property of an individual's thought. Thus, as the poststructural story goes, Piaget exaggerated the stage-like character of cognitive growth.

2. The mind should not be conceptualized as a central processing unit organized by means of abstract operational structures. The mind is decentralized, modular and concrete. What you think about is decisive for how

you think. Thus, as the poststructural story goes, Piaget misjudged the role of "mere content" and domain-specific knowledge in reasoning, judgment, and memory.

3. The mind of the child is differentiated and complex from the start. Kant's synthetic *a priori* truths (object permanence, number, time, space, causality) are hard-wired as innate ideas. The newly born already know a lot from the deep past. Thus, as the story goes (and here arguably the story is more premodern than poststructural and how the various themes fit together remains to be seen) Piaget underestimated the intellectual sophistication and operational capacity of infants and young children. We come into the world old not young.

4. There is no property of thought that can serve as a general index of intellectual immaturity. The various properties of thinking (concrete vs. abstract, intuitive vs. reflective, functional vs. taxonomic, context-bound vs. context-free, temporal vs. logical, emotion-laden vs. affect-free, etc.) that were supposed to serve of indicators of mental development do not necessarily correlate with each other, and out of context they are not reliable measures of mental immaturity. There are advanced modes of thought where performers are expert and sophisticated precisely because they are concrete, percept-driven, imagistic, context-bound, emotion-laden, and so on. Thus, as the poststructural story goes, Piaget mythologized and totalized the unidirectional nature of progressive conceptual change.

According to the story told these days it is an entirely open question whether the newly born come into the world with an overabundance of specific and contradictory propensities, some of which are selected for and others suppressed by cultural practices in the course of development (the "maintenance-loss" approach to socialization; Werker, 1989), whether the newly born come into the world (as Piaget believed) with only a few specific propensities (e.g., a sucking reflex) which are then elaborated and generalized in the course of development, or whether the newly born come into the world with either a lot or a few highly general propensities (e.g., to "categorize"—treat like cases alike and different cases differently) that are then specified and given character in the course of development.

I have contributed to this story. I like this story. I even believe in this story. There are themes in this story that I have narrated before in other publications. Nevertheless there is, I believe, at least one motif that has yet to receive sufficient attention in the poststructural literature: the tension between rationalism and pluralism in Piaget's account of mental development. In the remainder of this chapter I suggest that any credible poststructural theory of mental development must find a way to marry rationalism and cultural pluralism, which is a match that Piaget was disinclined to make.

IS IT POSSIBLE TO BE A DEVELOPMENTALIST AND A CULTURAL PLURALIST AT THE SAME TIME?

In my view any credible poststructural story about mental development must engage and come to terms with Piaget's rationalistic conception of the process of mental development. As a rationalist who studied conceptual change Piaget believed that what *deserved* to be called mature thinking (or correct mental functioning) could be characterized in terms of strictly objective ideals or standards (e.g., the rules of logic, the abstract principle of justice). Piaget thus believed that what *deserved* to be called mature thinking was the same across cultures and history. He believed that when people disagree about what is true there are principles, methods, or procedures that can reconcile their differences and produce agreement. Most developmentalists who take *culture* at all seriously have some difficulties with this aspect of Piaget's rationalism. So I am going to try to soften the idea of objective standards and rational justifiability. I am going to do this to make room for the relevance of a developmental perspective to cases where the standards and ideals that guide development and define mature thinking are contingent, contestable, plural, culture-specific and thus not universally binding.

The remainder of this chapter is thus about Piaget's rationalistic conception of the process of mental development, which I believe is separable from his monistic view of the mature product of that process. Piaget believed that the route to mature thinking (mental development) was (a) a temporal process (it took time to become a mature thinker); (b) a progressive process (over time more mature understandings superseded less mature understandings); and (c) an active process (over time more mature understandings superseded less mature understandings because individuals are self-reflective knowers who try to work out and see for themselves the rational justification for their own understandings). In praise of this aspect of Piaget's theory I argue that his very Hegelian conception of the process of mental development is entirely right-minded and is so alien to the philosophical assumptions of both empirical psychology and poststructural thinking in the United States that it has largely been overlooked or misunderstood.

Before I offer some tokens of respect for aspects of Piaget's rationalism, however, I have two other confessions to make. My first confession is that I am an anthropologist. More specifically I am an anthropological pluralist interested in different modes of thought and understanding among adults in different cultural traditions around the world. Over the years I have given special attention to Brahmanical Hindu traditions in India and secular liberal humanist traditions in the United States.

Anthropological pluralists are distrustful of certain applications of the Piagetian principle that what *deserves* to be called mature thinking (or

correct mental functioning) is the same across cultures and history. They become especially suspicious when a developmental theory is proposed by the lights of which the thinking (or mental functioning) of full grown adults in other cultures begins to look very much like the thinking of young children in our own.

For example, in his account of the Swiss child's idea of "immanent justice" Piaget makes it quite clear that he believes that there is a *universally binding* rational standard or ideal which defines mature thinking in this domain. In particular this rational standard or ideal is attained by endorsing the proposition that "wickedness may go unpunished and virtue remain unrewarded." Because the belief in immanent justice consists of endorsing the alternative proposition that "justice is a law of nature according to which for every transgression there is some natural catastrophe that serves as its punishment" the endorsement of immanent justice is viewed as an immature or less developed mode of thought. Yet as every anthropologist knows, something very much like a belief in immanent justice can be found not only in the thinking of Swiss 5- and 6-year-olds. It can also be found in the thinking of many millions of South Asian Hindu adults who believe in the idea of "karma" and among adults in many other cultures of the world. Are we to say that the beliefs of Hindu adults are immature or child-like? Are we to draw the opposite and equally invidious conclusion that Northern European children begin life as sophisticated Hindus and then fall into immaturity or regress as they age?

Anthropological pluralists are deeply suspicious of this kind of application of developmental theory, in which by means of some presumptively universalized standard for rational or mature thinking, adults in other cultures are analogized to children in our own, with the implication that they are intellectually immature. Margaret Mead (1932) long ago argued this point with Piaget over the issue of animistic thinking. She argued that among the Manus people of New Guinea it is the adults not the children who are the animists. She suggested that if one adopts the cultural perspective of Manus adults it is European adults who will appear to be intellectually immature because they think like Manus children. She preferred to view both Swiss adults and Manus adults as intellectually mature, each in their own way. Her view was that certain kinds of applications of developmental standards (presumptively universalizing the standard) smack of ethnocentrism and give developmental theory a bad name.

It seems to me that one very obvious implication of Mead's critique is that there are certain kinds of culture-specific standards or ideals for development that should not be applied or generalized to other populations. But it also seems to me that a second and less noted implication of her pluralistic view is that within a particular interpretive community or cultural context those very same ideals can serve perfectly well as developmental

standards for children and adults trying to work through for themselves (self-construct) the rational basis of their own traditions. Presumably it would be a matter of some concern among the Manus if their children never intellectually matured and constructed for themselves a defensible and locally rational animistic interpretation of the causal forces of nature.

This discomfort among anthropological pluralists with certain types of applications of developmental theory arises with respect to many other areas of knowledge. For example, adult thinking in much of Hindu society about the status and meaning of dreams (they are not thought to be merely subjective), about the power of words to influence biological and physical nature (mantras, kirtans and other verbal formulas are thought to be effective), and about the moral basis of hierarchy (*autonomy* is not privileged over *heteronomy*) is reminiscent of early Piagetian accounts of the ideas and understandings of Western children. Indeed, I suspect that one reason Piaget himself moved from those earlier accounts (which were focused on children's understandings of dreams, words, and punishment) to the later stages of his research (where he focused on children's understanding of number, chance, and logical necessity) was to accommodate criticism. In the process of constructing his own theory of the world he found a way to hold on to the view that what deserves to be called mature thinking can be characterized in terms of strictly objective ideals and standards and is the same across cultures and history. His way of doing this was to radically narrow the types of domains of knowledge (experimental reasoning—yes, dream understandings—no) to which his type of developmental analysis should be applied. In effect he adopted the premise common to all "structural" approaches: viz., the premise that human beings would all think the same way (reason the same way, make the same judgments) if it weren't for differences in the content of their thought. Looking back on his own early research informed by his subsequently constructed structural theory, I suspect Piaget must have viewed those early investigations of children's ideas about dreams, word meanings, and immanent justice as somewhat misguided studies of mere content. Mere content, he might have reasoned, is not proper grist for developmental structural analysis.

PIAGET'S CHALLENGE TO ANTHROPOLOGY

The second confession I want to make is that I have been a critic of Piaget (e.g., Shweder, 1982, 1984). I have gone so far as to suggest that research on mental development in children can be advanced by inverting his assumptions ("standing Piaget on his head") and by paying far more attention than did Piaget to assisted learning, to the discretionary or extralogical aspects of mental development, to the way content is part of the

process of thought and thus what you think about is decisive for how you think, and to the socialization of cultural ideals for development.

Nevertheless there are two appealing features of Piaget's conception of mental development to which I want to draw attention. Piaget believed that "logic is the morality of thought just as morality is the logic of action." Although this may be too narrow a view of the "morality of thought," Piaget's formulation makes it clear that (a) in his view the study of mental development is primarily a prescriptive rather than a merely descriptive discipline; (b) that having good reasons and justifications for what you think and do is a driving engine of conceptual change; and (c) that *logic* is not just another domain of knowledge or specialized module of mind.

I will not discuss "c" in this context, except to note that it is quite fashionable these days, in our poststructural age, to argue that logic is just one more specialized module of thought or domain of knowledge like recognizing faces or speaking a natural language. The alternative view is that logic is an essential even if incomplete part of the rationality internal to any domain of knowledge. This view has credibility in my mind because it is hard to understand how the *justification* of reasoning and decision making in any domain of knowledge could proceed without the presence within that domain and every domain of something like a logic device.

Piaget's commitment to the study of mental development as a prescriptive science and to the process of self-justification as an engine of conceptual change are the features of his thinking that I believe are most worthy of praise. He recognized that the idea of human development implies much more than change over time, that it implies some desirable state of mental functioning the ultimate attainment of which is a mark of progress.

These aspects of Piaget's thinking are especially challenging for my own discipline of anthropology, which is well known for its emphasis on the existence of plurality or diversity in the descriptive norms of cultures around the world. Thus for example, anthropologists will tell you that it is *normal* (in the descriptive sense) for Samburu girls in Kenya to be circumcised during adolescence, that it is *normal* (in the descriptive sense) in India for widows not to be invited to a wedding ceremony because their presence is normally thought to be inauspicious, that it is *normal* (in the descriptive sense) for American midlife adults to put their own parents out to pasture in an old age home rather than care for them in their own household. Speaking as an anthropologist, if I were to describe for you *normal* medical cognition in rural India, I would start by pointing out that given the normal metaphysical belief system subscribed to by hundreds of millions of Hindus, when physical or mental suffering occurs the diagnostic situation is, from the native point of view, understandably quite complex. For one thing, there is not just one world to deal with but three: the society of the gods (who are a major presence in nearly every household and

community), the society of the spirits, including the spirits of dead ancestors (who are also a major presence in almost every household and community), and the society of human beings. Moreover it is normally believed that these three worlds all interact in a universe governed by the principles of "dharma" (objective obligations emanating from God) and the laws of "karma" (the idea that nature guarantees that in the long run for every action there is a just and proportionate reaction).

Notice however that these anthropological claims about the existence of plurality or diversity in the norms of different cultures amount to little more than the proposition that there is variety in what people around the world believe and desire. They do not come close to touching on the far more challenging issues raised by Piaget rationalism: Is there variety in what is believable not just in what is believed? Is there plurality in what is desirable not just in what is desired? Is it really possible for mental states that are pathological, irrational, or immature in one community to be healthy, rational, and mature in another?

Piaget's strict notions of objectivity and rational justifiability blocked him from seeing how the answer to these questions might be "yes." Ironically most poststructural pluralistic anthropologists who might intuitively believe that the answer to those questions is yes have yet to realize that issues of justification are at the heart of cultural analysis. They have yet to realize that the mere existence of variety in cultural beliefs and desires does not imply that it is possible to be mentally developed and intellectually mature in culturally divergent ways.

Piaget's challenge to anthropology is to demonstrate how particular cultural understandings and practices can seem well-founded and compelling precisely because they have been developmentally constructed out of the self-reflective processes of rational individuals. His challenge to anthropology is to show how autonomous reason depends upon cultural tradition to exercise its critical powers. His challenge to anthropology is to formulate an ideal of rationality (and an account of the role of metaphysical beliefs in the construction of our sense of reality) that will make it credible to be a developmentalist and a pluralist at the very same time. When that challenge has been substantially met, cultural psychology will have come of age.

Author's Note

This commentary draws on and develops certain ideas about our poststructural age that were presented at the Conference on "The Growing Mind," Centennial Celebration of Jean Piaget's Birth, Geneva, Switzerland, September 14-18, 1996, in an unpublished paper entitled "Piaget's Challenge to Anthropology: Stories and Remarks From the Post-Structural Age." The paper was delivered in Geneva at the Invited Symposium on "Cognitive

Development Beyond Childhood: Wisdom and the Pragmatics of Life," chaired by Paul Baltes.

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