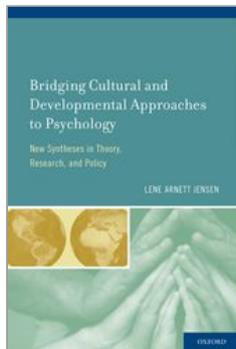


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Commentary: Ontogenetic Cultural Psychology

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Abstract and Keywords

This commentary aims to convince on two points. First, that this collection of chapters which has aimed at synthesizing developmental and cultural psychology, would be entirely unconvincing to Jean Piaget, if he were alive today. Secondly, that Jean Piaget is arguably right that it is not possible to be a developmental psychologist and a cultural psychologist at the same time. Nevertheless, that's no reason for despair because the developmental perspective as understood by Piaget is not the only way to understand ontogenetic change. The collection of chapters is a clarion call for the rebirth of an ontogenetic perspective on cultural psychology, but it will face many challenges; not the least of which is the suspicion of some critics that cultural acquisition typically amounts to little more than turning children into over-socialized slaves of underdeveloped traditions.

Keywords: Jean Piaget, developmental process, cultural acquisition, cultural psychology, plural norms

In this brief commentary I hope to convince the reader of two points. First, this fine collection of essays aimed at synthesizing developmental and cultural psychology would be entirely unconvincing to Jean Piaget, if he were alive today. Yet this book ought to be of great interest to those who investigate the way ontogenetic changes in the mental life of individuals vary by virtue of growing up as a member of a particular group. The collection is a clarion call for the rebirth of an ontogenetic perspective on cultural psychology. Second, Jean Piaget is arguably right that it is not possible to be a developmental psychologist and a cultural psychologist at the same time, but that's no reason for despair because the developmental perspective as understood by Piaget is not the only way to understand ontogenetic change. Allow me to explain.¹

Is It Possible to Be a Developmental Psychologist and a Cultural Psychologist at the Same Time?

By a developmental psychologist, I mean what Piaget would have meant by the designation—namely, a researcher who investigates those ontogenetic changes in the mental life of individuals that can be attributed to developmental processes *per se*. By a cultural psychologist, I mean a researcher who investigates those aspects of the mental life of individuals that are acquired (or selected for) by virtue of thick participation (typically beginning at birth) in the traditions and folkways of a particular ethical and interpretive community (**p.304**) or cultural group. So, is it possible to do developmental psychology and do cultural psychology at the same time? Piaget, as I understand the implications of his concept of development, thought the answer was “no;” and he had some good reasons for thinking so. And I, myself, speaking as an anthropologist and cultural psychologist, do not necessarily disagree with him. I certainly don't think the answer to the question is obviously “yes.”

Nor do I think that the conceptual boundary or academic divide that distinguishes the study of developmental processes from the study of processes of cultural acquisition needs to be bridged, erased, or transcended for the sake of promoting interdisciplinary cooperation between psychologists interested in studying ontogenetic change and anthropologists interested in studying the mental life of “the native.” Indeed, the essays in this volume attest to the fact that psychologists who study ontogenetic changes in the mental life of individuals are not necessarily studying ontogenetic change as a developmental process *per se*. Many of those psychologists would identify themselves as developmental psychologists but they are studying something else. That something else is the ontogeny of a cultural psychology. It is not only well-worth studying but is fundamental to the mental life of all human beings. Their research contributions auger well for the future of collaborative research in cultural psychology, but it is a noteworthy and significant retreat from the concept of development as understood by Piaget.

Piaget himself never retreated from the concept of development. Over time, he just restricted his research to those aspects of the mental life where he thought ontogenetic change was truly developmental. Over time, the aspects of the mental studied by Piaget became more and more remote from the aspects of the mental life studied by cultural psychologists. By the end of his career, Piaget’s interest in “culture” or “society” was primarily as an enabler or inhibitor of progressive change in those areas of the mental life that were truly developmental. He cared about changes in the child’s understanding of reversibility, transitivity, and logically necessary truths. He had no interest in changes in a child’s conception of the stages of life, of who counts as an avoidance versus joking kinsmen, or the importance of taking a purifying ceremonial bath before entering the family prayer room, or of changes in children’s attitudes to shyness in their peers, all of which he would have viewed as non-developmental changes in the mental life of the child.

What is a developmental process *per se*? What does it mean to investigate ontogenetic change in the mental life of individuals as a developmental change? As articulated by Piaget (and by other famous developmental psychologists influenced by Piaget), the very idea of a developmental process *per se* (as applied, for example, to the development of the mental life of individuals) presupposes two conditions: (a) the existence of some objectively desirable or ideal state of mental functioning that is understood to be a directional goal or end-state for ontogenetic changes in mental functioning (i.e., the mental end-state is not immediately or readily online at birth) and (b) movement in the direction of the desirable end-state must be achieved or cultivated by means of processes related to the capacity of human beings to become self-governing **(p.305)** rational agents who are motivated to do things and believe things for good reasons and to feel justified in what they want, feel, value, know, and think. The second condition (condition “b”) is what Piaget meant by self-construction.

In linking mental development to processes associated with rational self-governance (i.e., with autonomous self-construction increasingly and ultimately guided by the dictates of reason), Piaget had in mind such processes as self-reflection on one's own beliefs, the need and ability to make some kind of sense of one's picture of the world, attempts to assimilate new experiences to already-in-place interpretive frameworks, attempts to accommodate or revise already-in-place interpretive frameworks in the light of new experiences, and attempts to reason logically and eliminate inconsistencies from one's thinking. In other words, Piaget believed that the route to mental development was a temporal process (it took time to develop into a rational thinker), a progressive directional process (over time, more universally justifiable understandings superseded less justifiable understandings), and also a so-called “active process.” “Active” here means that according to Piaget's idea of a developmental process *per se*, over time, more developed understandings supersede less developed understandings because individuals are self-reflective agents who try to work out and see for themselves the rational justification for their own understandings.

It was in the light of that conception of development that Piaget did not think it was possible to be a developmental psychologist and a cultural psychologist at the same time. Thus, in his research in developmental psychology, Piaget adopts the premise common to all “structural approaches”—namely, that human beings would all think the same way (reason the same way, remember the same way, make moral judgments the same way) if it weren’t for differences in the content of their thought or in the social environmental contexts that either facilitate or retard the flowering of fully developed mental structures in the individual members of some group. In other words, Piaget understood the very idea of development (and its two essential conditions outlined above) to entail much more than just change over time. For Piaget, development essentially implies some rationally desirable state of mental functioning, the ultimate attainment of which is a mark of progress.

Given that focus on developmental processes *per se*, Piaget’s interest in the varieties of human mentalities across cultural groups was narrow and specialized. The only point in investigating variations in mental life across cultural groups was to document the extent to which children in some societies were able to flower more than others in their mental development, and perhaps to identify the social conditions that either facilitated or retarded rational self-governance and developmental advance. In this regard, the concept of development as used by Piaget parallels the concept of development used by the grand theorists of the French Enlightenment (Voltaire, Diderot, Condorcet, and others) who imagined that there is only one ideal universal civilization, in comparison to which, over historical time, most nations fall permanently short of the ideal, whereas others become more and more civilized. In many ways, Piaget was the Condorcet of 20th-century psychology.

(p.306) Not all the significant aspects of the mental life of individuals are developmental in the sense just described—for several reasons. These days many of us argue that what you think about can be decisive for how you think. Piaget, we are inclined to say, misjudged the role and importance of “mere content” and domain-specific knowledge in reasoning, judgment, and memory. Although I believe it to be true that what you think about is decisive for how you think (*see* the essay by Michelle Leichtman, Chapter 3, where this is her major conclusion) I doubt that Piaget would have disagreed. I don’t think he would have denied that the mental life of both children and adults is replete with nondevelopmental thoughts, values, and ideas, but he would have associated those aspects of the mental life with “heteronomy” and viewed them as a kind of oversocialized, indoctrinated or affect-driven mental enslavement to a cultural tradition. As I understand Piaget’s agenda, he was merely trying to focus research in developmental psychology on those aspects of mental life that could defensibly be examined as products of development processes *per se*, which by definition meant getting beyond local content.

Piaget’s Escape from Cultural Psychology

Arguably, Piaget himself came to realize in the course of his career that his early research on Swiss children’s understandings of (for example) dreams, animism, punishment, or justice might well have been about content-rich processes of cultural acquisition rather than about developmental processes *per se*. Not surprisingly, it is that early work by Piaget—*The Child’s Conception of the World* (first published in 1929) or *The Moral Judgment of the Child* (first published in 1932)—that seems most congenial to cultural psychologists.

I suspect this is one reason that over time, Piaget moved away from research on nondevelopmental domains of human understanding and took up instead research focused on children's understandings of what he took to be the synthetic *a priori* (and hence universal, objective) domains identified by Immanuel Kant—namely, number, object, cause, space, time, logical necessity. In the process of rationally self-constructing his own theory of mental life, he found a way to hold onto the view that what deserves to be called a true developmental process of ontogenetic change can be characterized in terms of strictly objective ideals and standards, free of the collectively produced historically particular subjective judgments of this or that cultural group. He believed that it is precisely because the desirable mental states in those “Kantian domains” will be appealing to all rational self-governing individuals that they will be the same end-states across cultures and history.

In other words, Piaget's strategy for staying the course with his developmental agenda was to radically narrow the types of domains of knowledge (logical and experimental reasoning: yes; dream understandings and ideas about what is good: no) to which his type of developmental analysis might legitimately be applied. Looking back on his own early research informed by his subsequently constructed “structural” theory, I suspect Piaget must have (p.307) viewed his own 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 analysis. Studying the content of thought, he might have judged, is something for the cultural psychologists to do, as I myself (Jean Piaget) unwittingly did early in my career.

Of course, these days the range of application for the concept of development in the study of human mental life is at risk of being narrowed even further than Piaget would have liked. And it is not hard to understand why. In 1966, when I entered graduate school, psychology in America had long since lost its institutional connection to philosophy. So when discussing Piaget's research, no one bothered to point out to us that the core ideas ultimately examined by Piaget (number, object, cause, space, time) were the same ideas identified by Immanuel Kant as synthetic *a priori* truths. No one bothered to point out that the mastery of those ideas is a necessary precondition for 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 learning and knowledge for empiricists) makes no rational sense. Perhaps that is why no one (with the exception of, perhaps, Noam Chomsky) bothered to boggle our minds and disrupt Piaget's developmental story by asking how it is possible for a young infant to experience anything at all (including Piaget's experimental manipulations) if he or she does not already have at hand (or in its mouth or in its head) the ideas that Piaget says are not available until 18 months or 6 years of age or what have you?

I doubt we have become more philosophically sophisticated in the last 40 or 50 years. Nevertheless, for whatever reason, many are inclined to say these days that when it comes to the Kantian domains studied by Piaget (the abstract idea of an object or of number or of causation), the mental life of the child is differentiated and complex from the start and that Kant's synthetic *a priori* truths (object permanence, number, time, space, causality) are hard-wired as innate ideas. As any evolutionary psychologist will aver, the newly born already seem to know a lot from the deep past. The research literature is full of demonstrations that Piaget underestimated the intellectual sophistication and inferential capacity of infants and young children. From a structural point of view, it would appear that we come into the world old and mentally sophisticated rather than young and innocent. So even in the Kantian domains, the concept of development *per se* may not readily apply.

The relevant bottom-line message for this commentary is that it is hard to bridge the divide between developmental psychology and cultural psychology because from a conceptual or definitional point of view, there may be an ineradicable distinction between developmental processes *per se* and the processes associated with cultural acquisition. A developmental psychologist, one who honors the definition of a developmental process offered above, is honor-bound to argue like this: To the very extent that a desired mental end-state does not have a rational appeal to all self-governing agents, it does not count as a standard for development *per se*; hence, the process influencing ontogenetic **(p.308)** change in that area of mental functioning does not count as a developmental process, at least not according to the concept of development *per se* promoted by Piaget.

Plural Norms for Ontogenetic Change

The real bridge, as I see it in this collection of essays, is the one crossed by developmental psychologists and cultural psychologists walking hand-in-hand on their way to the study of plural norms for ontogenetic change, while leaving the land of developmental analysis and meandering in a variety of ways into a renewed intellectual territory where one investigates the ontogeny of some distinct type of cultural psychology. Ideally such investigations will result in a re-conceptualization of some of the ways rational and non-rational processes interact during the ontogenetic course of cultural reproduction, cultural revival, or cultural change.

Given what I have already said about the idea of development *per se*, what does it mean to speak of plural norms for ontogenetic change? Let's start with the idea of a norm, which is routinely analyzed into a descriptive sense and a prescriptive sense. A descriptive norm is a report issued by an observer about what typically or regularly is the case for some designated population—for example, a report about the typical emotions and feelings of Hopi Indian women who have made a marriage proposal to a Hopi Indian man but have not yet received a response. In contrast, a prescriptive norm is an exhortation or regulative expectation issued by a promulgator about what ought to be the case for some designated population.

Moving on to the idea of the plural, that notion of course implies “more than one.” The literature in anthropology and cultural psychology is in large measure a record of the existence of plural norms in the descriptive sense. It is a standard feature of this literature to document the existence of two or more populations, each with a different historically evolved typical pattern of behavior. For example, it might be reported that unlike the vast majority of adult women living on the Upper West Side of Manhattan, the vast majority of adult Samburu women in Kenya believe that it is good and desirable for their adolescent girls to be “circumcised,” or it might be reported that unlike Hindu populations in rural India, ascetic fasting is thought to be pathological by the American Psychiatric Association.

It can, of course, be eye-opening to learn (as we do from Alice Schlegel’s essay in this book; see Chapter 7) that among the Hopi Indians, it is the women of the society who typically propose marriage to the men rather than the other way around or to learn that unlike most Western European and North American societies today among “Congo Pygmy settlements, 18- and 19th-century English, French, and German villages, and 20th-century Chinatowns” (and one is tempted to add the Taliban of Afghanistan to the list) teenage boys were allowed by the adults in the community to punish neighbors who threatened community well-being. But notice these reports are statements about the plurality of **(p.309)** *descriptive* norms on a worldwide or historical scale (and thus carry no implications about what ought to be the case or whether the described patterns of behavior, various as they may be, are desirable or undesirable, mature or immature or should be viewed as either developed or underdeveloped in the Piagetian sense.

This brings us to the meaning of the concept of ontogenetic change in the phrase “plural norms for ontogenetic change.” In addressing the question of bridges between developmental psychology and cultural psychology, it is essential to recognize that the careful documentation by anthropologists and cultural psychologists of plural norms in the descriptive sense also includes a subclass of purely descriptive statements about the prescriptive norms (ideas about what is right, good, desirable, mature, or highly developed) adopted by members of different populations at different ages. These essentially descriptive positive science representations document the prescriptive norms of some local population or people (the consensual statements from some group about what is good or bad, desirable or undesirable, or valued or disvalued or about how one ought—or ought not—behave). They might include, for example, descriptions of the sort reported in the chapter by Xinyin Chen (Chapter 5) or in the chapter by Alice Schlegel (Chapter 7). Xinyin Chen reports that in urban elementary schools in China, the relation between shyness and peer acceptance went from positive in 1990 to negative in 2002. Alice Schlegel reports that whatever the prescriptive norms happen to be in a given society concerning the socialization of sexual restraint, obedience, and responsibility, they tend to be the same prescriptive norms for both boys and girls—on a worldwide cross-cultural scale prescriptive socialization in those domains is not a gendered issue.

But notice again that these are descriptive reports about the prescriptive norms of particular groups. These types of descriptive statements do not even begin to address the question mandated by the concept of development—namely, whether the embrace of a new and different attitude toward shyness among school-age children in China is a developmental gain or whether, to cite a provocative example, the adoption or “internalization” by adolescent Samburu girls of the adult Samburu female attitude toward female “circumcision” is a matter of progressive change with reference to objective or reason-based standards or ideals and grounded in a process of active self-construction.

It is surely important for the world to know that there is variety in the things that are desired or thought to be right and good by different peoples and in different times and places. But critics of the ideal of plural norms for ontogenetic change will be quick to point out that just because there is variety in how people behave or in what they prescriptively desire does not mean there is diversity in what is truly desirable from a developmental point of view. Such critics will be quick to point out that the existence of such variety in prescriptive norms does not mean that the Hopi, the Chinese, or the Samburu are anything other than the oversocialized slaves of an underdeveloped tradition.

Allow me to continue this line of attack and conclude on a mildly critical, yet constructive, note. Speaking as an interdisciplinary research scholar, it was **(p.310)** stimulating and heartening to participate as a discussant in the very lively and welcome conference that resulted in this collection of bridge-building essays. However, as far as I can tell, most of the essays in this volume try to bridge the disciplines of developmental and cultural psychology by adopting the strategy of restricting one's interests to the study of plural norms in the descriptive sense, thus skirting the kinds of prescriptive questions that are in the forefront when ontogenetic change is interpreted as a development process in the strong self-constructed progressive change sense of development proposed by Piaget.

This is a terrific strategy as far as it goes, and we learn things. We learn about cross-cultural variations in conceptions of the life-course. We learn about the social, economic, and educational factors associated with the historical emergence of culturally constructed stages of life in between childhood and mature adulthood. We learn, for example, that the stage of life called “adolescence” in English has become so extended in some populations that it is becoming possible to witness the emergence of a new socially constructed stage of life in the world of cosmopolitan elites and possibly beyond, which has no culturally recognized mono-lexical label as of yet but has been dubbed “Emerging Adulthood” by Jeff Arnett and others. We learn about the costs and benefits of being “normal” or fitting in with the consensus as judged by ones peers and other significant others who share one’s particular social location within a society. We learn about the ontogenetic patterns of children’s reliance on different types of moral concepts (autonomy promoting concepts, community promoting concepts, and divinity promoting concepts), patterns that are not uniform across moral concepts and may in some instances (e.g., with regard to divinity promoting concepts) vary across cultural groups. The bridge I would propose for the future is to try to wed Jean Piaget’s idea of rational self-governance and active self-construction to the very process of cultural acquisition; so as to make it more apparent that cultural psychology is not just the study of “the despotism of tradition”; and to show that it is possible for equally rational human beings to diverge in their ontogenetic mental trajectories, in their understandings of what is true, good, and valuable and in their conceptions of self, society, and nature.

Note

Notes

(1.) This commentary carries forward, revises, and partially draws on formulations in two earlier essays: Richard A. Shweder, "True Ethnography: The Lore, the Law, and the Lure," In R. Jessor, A. Colby & R.A. Shweder (Eds.), *Ethnography and Human Development*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996; and R.A. Shweder, "Culture and Development in Our Post-Structural Age," In R.A. Shweder (Ed.), *Why Do Men Barbecue?: Recipes for Cultural Psychology* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. I wish to thank Elliot Turiel for his helpful commentary on my commentary. I also wish to thank the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey (where I was a Rosanna and Charles Jaffin Founders' Circle Member during the time of the conference on "Bridging Cultural and Developmental Approaches to Psychology") for their generous support of my writing and academic work.

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