Emotional Development, Theory and Applications

A Neo-Piagetian Perspective

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This book is dedicated to the following people in acknowledgment of their contribution to my professional development and to my efforts to produce this book:

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Tables

Preface

My very first professional experience involved doing play therapy with children while teaching human development as a member of the College of Education faculty at the University of Delaware. This first experience left me interested in human emotions and their development. I was puzzled by the fact that there was no theory of emotional development as such, and that emotion was regarded as too soft a topic for serious study.

When I studied psychoanalytic theory I discovered that, according to Freud, our emotions do not change; they are instinctive and innate, and they are just transferred from one object to another in the course of our development so no theory about their development was needed.

The work of Tomkins (1962, 1963) proved interesting for its emphasis on primary affects, but his work focused essentially on the delineation of the primary emotions (affects) in studies of facial expressions across cultures, and not on their development.

Izard's (1977) differential emotions theory, building to some degree on the work of Tomkins (1962, 1963), was more of a topography of human emotions than a theory about their development. This work and his more recent work (Izard & Malatesta, 1987) are limited by an emphasis on the developmental course of facial

expressions and what appears to be a reification of emotion, that is, the practice of regarding emotions as real entities rather than as functional processes.

Cognitive theories of emotion have focused on the relationship between cognition and emotion (Arnold, 1960) and on cognition, emotion, and the person-environment relationship described by Lazarus (1991a, 1991b), but neither this work nor that of Ellis (1962, 1985) has produced a theory of emotional development.

Lewis and Michalson (1983) presented a structural model of emotion and then described "the emergence and the unfolding of a particular emotion in both children and adults" (p. 129). Their emphasis, however, was on the socialization of emotion, particularly its expression, and as interesting and informative as that was, it did not represent a theory of emotional development. They suggested that "a comprehensive theory . . . may never be available" (Lewis & Michalson, 1983, p. 155).

There has been a resurgence of interest in emotions in childhood. Saarni and Harris (1989) have edited a series of papers on children's understanding of emotion, and Garber and Dodge (1991) have edited a series of papers on the development of emotion regulation and dysregulation. But the emphasis on understanding, control, and regulation, in my view, is a reflection of the psychoanalytic view that emotions are essentially innate and that our task is to understand and control them.

Harris and Saarni (1989) recognize the work of Rosaldo (1980) and Lutz (1987) who have a perspective similar to the one that I have in this work, but then they allude to this as a radical approach to the explanation of emotional development. I agree that the approach is different, and I can only add that I have felt for some time that something different was indeed necessary.

However, consistent with the perspective that I am developing here, Sroufe (1979) and Barrett and Campos (1987) have presented an organizational and functional analysis of the ontogenesis of emotions in infancy and early childhood, and Kagan (1984) has outlined some of the changes that occur in emotions from infancy through adolescence.

Several years ago, I began a serious effort to assimilate the growing body of information about human emotions into Piaget's child development paradigm, not Piaget's cognitive development

paradigm but rather his earlier paradigm in which he made observations and advanced hypotheses about both cognition and affective development, and about their relationship.

It became clear to me that Piaget wrote a number of conflicting things about the relationship between these two dimensions of development, but when I ignored the inconsistencies and studied his basic assumptions, and his approach to development as a process of construction and reconstruction always at the service of development and adaptation, then I had what I believed to be the basic tenets of a viable theory of emotional development.

In my opinion, Piaget was a consummate developmental theorist. In the Introduction to this book, I discuss why I believe Piaget lost interest in affective development. I have tried to pick up this topic where he dropped it.

The neo-Piagetian theory being advanced here is surely a product of my early interest tempered by my experience as: a school psychologist; a clinical psychologist; the director of a community mental health center; the director of a state mental health program; a professor of psychology, education, and special education; the chairperson of a university department of special education; and years of experience as a therapist for both children and adults.

My experience also included extensive work with emotionally disturbed children, some of which I reported in the literature (Dupont, Landsman, & Valentine, 1953; Dupont, 1957, 1968, 1969, 1975, 1978), over eight years of work as senior author on the development and field testing of *Toward Affective Development* (1974) and *Transition* (1979), and several efforts to articulate a theory of affective or emotional development (Dupont, 1979a, 1979b, 1989). I doubt if anyone brings more breadth of experience to the topic of emotional development than I do.

This book reflects my lifelong interest in emotional development. The theory offers an alternative to the psychoanalytic assumptions about the nature of our emotions that dominate our conventional wisdom. Freud's assumption that our emotions are instinctual and innate, and that they reside (so to speak) in our unconscious, to be understood and controlled through the process of psychoanalysis, is still a dominant notion in our conventional wisdom. If our emotions are instinctual and innate, then they have little relationship to our needs and values.

This neo-Piagetian theory of emotional development postulates that both our feelings and emotions, which are assumed to be constructions, are informed by our needs and values, and that our feelings and emotions change considerably in the course of our development. It also postulates that our consciousness is constructed as a product of our social experience, and that its acquisition plays a critical role in the development of our emotional maturity.

I sincerely believe that it is a viable theory worthy of serious consideration and research because there are important implications that flow from it.

Introduction

In his early work, Piaget was interested in both cognitive and affective development and their relationship. This interest was manifested in a number of books and papers: *Play, Dreams and Imitation in Childhood* (1951), *Six Psychological Studies* (1967), *The Psychology of the Child* (with Barbel Inhelder, 1969), *Psychology of Intelligence* (1972), and *Intelligence and Affectivity* (1981).

In most of this published material, the transformations of affect that accompany the cognitive transformations, which are central to his theory of cognitive development, are described. In *Intelligence and Affectivity* (1981, p. 14), Piaget even suggests the following stages of affective development:

Intra-individual Feelings
Hereditary organizations
First acquired feelings
Affects regulating intentional behavior

Interpersonal Feelings
Intuitive affects
Normative affects
Idealistic feelings

In all of this work, and especially in his hypothesized stages, Piaget makes it clear that he believes that affect, feelings, and emotions change in the course of development.

But then, except for two papers (invited addresses that were published in 1962 and 1976a), Piaget gave no further attention to affect and its development. He appears to have lost all interest in the topic. In fact, in an interview with Bringuier (1980) he denies ever having been interested in affect at all.

Why does he mention affect, affectivity, and even affective development in a number of works and then drop it? I believe the answer to this question is in the history of Piaget's personal development. An abbreviated chronology of Piaget's developmental history is as follows (Gruber & Vonèche, 1977, p. x1i):

1896: Birth, Neuchâtel (Switzerland); first child and only son of Arthur and Rachel Piaget.

1907: First article on an albino sparrow.

1918: Doctor of Natural Sciences; thesis on molluscs, University of Neuchâtel; publication of a novel, *Recherche*.

1919-1920: Studies psychology for experimental methodology and measurement in Zürich under Lipps and Wreschner, and under Bleuler for psychiatric clinic; studies and practicum in Paris at the Alfred Binet Institute; publication of a paper on psychoanalysis.

1921: Director of studies, Jean-Jacques Rousseau Institute in Geneva; first articles on cognitive child psychology.

1923: Married Valentine Châtenay; publication of *The Language and Thought of the Child*.

1924: Publication of *Judgment and Reasoning in the Child*.

This abbreviated chronology of Piaget's developmental history suggests that his progress in his chosen field of interest was straightforward and uneventful. But there is another story, a more personal story, one that casts light on why he wrote a novel when he was but 15 years old and on why he was conflicted about studying affect.

Piaget (1952) revealed many details of his early experience in an article he wrote for a book edited by Boring, *History of Psychology in Autobiography*; in a novel he wrote when he was 15, *Recherche*; and in an interview with Anthony (1976a) in which Piaget provided the following biographical data:

At Age 7 or Earlier. Because of his mother's mental disorder (Anthony believed she was psychotic) Piaget gave up playing. He did this partly in imitation of his father, a scholar who taught him the value of systematic work and "to take refuge in a private and nonfictitious world" (p. 239).

"I have always," Piaget wrote, "detested any departure from reality, an attitude which I relate to this important influential factor of my early life, namely, my mother's poor mental state" (p. 239).

At Age 10. He became a very serious collector and classifier of molluscs and spent all of his free time on this work. By 15, he was a recognized malacologist.

At Age 15. His mother, a devout Protestant, insisted that he take formal religious instruction. Although Piaget was a Christian and a participant in Christian youth activities, his father (who considered himself a scientist) was critical of current religious beliefs and did not attend church.

Piaget, who also considered himself a scientist, was caught in the middle of this conflict between his mother and father. He wanted to please them both, but the conflict also raised an issue for him about the relationship between religion and science. Piaget tried to resolve this issue by reading everything he could find relating to it. He appears to have taken extensive notes, filling several notebooks, but he worked so frantically at this task that his own emotional health broke down and he was forced to spend a year in the mountains. We can assume, of course, that he had been sent to the mountains with orders to avoid further study and note-taking—so he wrote a novel!

This novel, *Recherche*, is obviously autobiographical because the central character, Sebastian, is a depressed young man in the midst of a religious crisis. Writing this novel seems to have been Piaget's way of confronting his crisis and to have been his therapy. The novel also reveals a remarkable acquaintance with the philosophical and scientific thought of this period. Gruber and Vonèche (1977) provide the following synopsis of Piaget's novel:

> *Recherche* is not a novel in the usual sense of the word. It belongs to the same tradition of introspection as the works of two other Swiss writers, Rousseau and Amiel.

Recherche means both "search" and "research"; the book is a personal journal in the form of a novel, having as its sole object, like all such journals, the ego. (p. 42)

Sebastian is absorbed with "the relations between science and faith, the value of science as a theory of knowledge, the relations between science and morality, and, finally, social salvation" (p. 42).

In 210 pages, Piaget describes Sebastian's struggle with these questions. Sebastian's conflict is resolved when he concludes that:

Science gives knowledge of good and of evil. It can explain everything, but it says nothing about values. It is faith that speaks of them. Faith is not knowledge, it is action. The contradiction between faith and knowledge is thus resolved. . . . Science gives the laws of the world, faith is its engine; in obeying these two forces, social salvation is the equilibrated result. (p. 43)

Anthony (1976a) believes that Piaget resolved his conflict by constructing a magnificent theoretical edifice that was comprehensive, self-contained, internally consistent, and rigorously freed from affect—an affectless monolith (p. 241).

However, somewhat later, Anthony (1976b) seems to recognize that he was perhaps a little carried away in these characterizations of Piaget's thought and theorizing: "In an earlier article the present author went so far as to caricature Piaget's approach by describing it as a 'psychology without emotion' (Anthony, 1957). In this presentation almost twenty years later, some effort will be made to modify this global and somewhat erroneous epithet" (p. 43).

Anthony continued: "Piaget has persistently maintained from his earliest writings that affect and intelligence were two distinct but complementary and inseparable aspects of behaviour, performing different but essential functions in adapting the individual to his environment, and undergoing a parallel development with corresponding stages" (p. 43).

My own belief is that having resolved his crisis and conflict, Piaget was free to think about affect and emotion and their place in development, but he resisted examining his own emotions, as suggested in the following comments he made to Anthony (1976a):

It was this disturbing factor [his mother's poor mental health] which made me intensely interested in psychoanalysis and psychopathology but at the

same time blocked any desire I had to involve myself deeper in that particular direction. As a result, I have always preferred the study of normalcy and the working of the intellect to the tricks of the unconscious. (p. 239)

But what is most interesting is that in 1921 Piaget had an eight-month psychoanalysis. In an interview with Bringuier (1980), he describes having spent one hour a day, seven days a week with a female analyst who terminated her work with him because he would not accept most of her interpretations!

Piaget, then, appears to have been interested in emotion, but he was defensive about examining his own. Perhaps the most truthful thing that can be said is that he was conflicted in his interest.

Studying Piaget's work as intensively as I have has left me with the strong impression that Piaget never managed to free himself from the notion that to study feelings and emotions was tantamount to doing psychoanalysis, something he does seem to have resisted as much as he resisted being in analysis himself.

Early in his work, Piaget points out two critical issues on which he differed with Freudian thought. The first has to do with the question, are emotions present early and then transferred from one person to another without really changing (that is, is anger always anger but merely transferred from one person to another), *or* are emotions constructed and reconstructed in early relationships and throughout our life span? Is anger at 2 different than anger at 5, 10, 15, or even 30 years of age?

The second issue has to do with the conservation of affect (emotion). According to Piaget, emotions are conserved in the constructions that comprise the various emotions, that is, in the action schemes and representational level cognitive structures which provide the form and direction for our various emotions, and *not* in the unconscious as a reservoir of emotion.

Very early in his work, Piaget (1951) was critical of the Freudian concept of the unconscious as a reservoir of ideas and emotions. In postulating an unconscious, says Piaget, Freud was committing the substantialist fallacy; he was concretizing an abstraction (p. 187).

But in all that he wrote about affect (and there is more than most people realize), Piaget was clear that although we are not always conscious of our feelings and actions—that is, the phenomenon is

real—the notion of an unconscious reservoir is bad science, and our emotions *are* constructions.

As a research tool, the clinical interview (which Piaget seems to have borrowed from psychiatry) could easily have been used to study children's emotions. He had a viable hypothesis: Emotions are constructions which are transformed in the course of development. But he resisted testing this hypothesis. To my knowledge he *never* talked to any children about their feelings or emotions.

Later, psychoanalysis became very popular and Piaget's criticisms of it were ignored. His ideas were also ignored, and since he did not want to be a psychoanalyst he dropped his interest in affect. In his interview with Bringuier (1980) he said he never was interested in it anyway.

In my search for a theory of emotional development, however, I came to the conclusion that Piaget's hypothesis, that emotions are constructions that contribute to the organism's equilibrium with its environment, provides the basic foundation for a theory of emotional development.

In this book then, my objectives are: (a) to build upon the theory of emotional development that I found implicit in Piaget's writings; and (b) to describe the application of this theory to assessment, education, and psychotherapy.

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