

## PIAGET AND KOHLBERG LOSE THE LIMELIGHT

(A Review of J. Bruner and H. Haste's *Making Sense*, and a Note on N. Eisenberg and P. Mussen's *The Roots of Prosocial Behavior in Children*)

Ann B. Pratt  
Capital University

Mainstream developmental psychologists have been intertwining their work again with social psychology and anthropology. They have rediscovered the idea that each person's development is embedded in a socio-cultural mesh. Bruner and Haste's collection of nine essays (1987) strikes this note repeatedly, and Eisenberg and Mussen (1989) give liberal space to socialization and culture. Both texts focus on very early development, drawing heavily on studies of youngsters under 7 or 8, although *Roots* also refers here and there to older children.

### A MAINSTREAM PERSPECTIVE ON EARLY COGNITION

Contributors to *Making Sense* treat selfhood (Bruner), planning skills (J. S. DeLoache & A. Brown), inferences (M. Donaldson), the understanding of feelings (J. Dunn), language-based thought (C. F. Feldman), rule acquisition (Haste), role-taking (P. Light), and gender representations (B. Lloyd); and they render the Piagetian egocentrism concept untenable (e.g., Butterworth). The volume in whole, and the editors' engaging introduction, present infants and youngsters (a) as social beings who construct meanings and cognitions out of the stream of their interactions with members of a particular culture; (b) as exhibiting previously unappreciated competencies, as contrasted to the "deficiencies" that dominated the Piaget-Kohlberg outlook; (c) as relying on linguistic interactions and shared concepts to make sense out of things; and (d) as far more discriminating and artful in the social sphere than has been realized. The philosophical underpinning of the volume is called dialectical (p. 5), and Vygotsky's conception of the development of mind is embraced over that of Piaget (pp. 5, 8, 9). G. H. Mead receives renewed, pronounced appreciation (pp. 41-42, 84).

### AUTHOR'S NOTE:

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to the author at 228 Learning Center, Capital University, Columbus, OH 43209. *Making Sense: The Child's Construction of the World* (204 pp., \$17.00 paperback) is published by Cambridge University Press. This review is a revision of one presented at the association for Behavior analysis, May 30, 1990.

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Although Bruner has long given socializer-child exchange a heavier role in cognitive growth than the Piagetians did, I was faintly surprised to note how fully the recent impatience with Piagetian theory has matured. Piaget is charged with wrongly presenting the child as a "lone scientist," groping slowly toward a grasp of certain universal insights (pp. 1, 8, 10). The new (new?) wisdom is that child-other interaction, far from being a mere side-show that "kicks forward" a relatively autonomous program for cognitive change, is itself *constitutive* of cognitive development (e.g., pp. 16-17). Surely this Vygotskian tilt can have a profoundly healthy effect on mainstream child studies (if the fashion just lasts long enough). Bruner and Haste and their colleagues, however, should not be interpreted as impressed with the case for the social origin of mind--not in the naturalistic sense that radical behaviorists propose. Rather, what they see in Vygotsky is a way to pull together the efforts of developmental, social-psychological, and anthropological studies, each of which they view as truncated (p.21). They want a new developmental psychology that transcends the old mutual tensions among these disciplines. Still, one piece of good tidings is that the new look in child development has moved toward a contextualistic account, and away from the naive over-enchantment with abstract universals that was so characteristic of the cognitive stage theories in their heyday. Consistent with that theme, Feldman is roundly skeptical of the form-content distinction proposed by Piaget and Kohlberg, seeing it as a highly artificial affair (pp. 132-133, 176-177).

This book virtually annihilates the egocentrism concept (e.g., pp. 72-76, 84-86). Part of the case is made by reclaiming Siegel and Brainerd's early criticism (1978, pp. 34-41), and related work up to about 1978. Those findings are not repeated here, but the gist of them was that 3-to-6 year-olds show numerous signs of differentiating between their own view and that of others. A second part of the case is established by later work, ably discussed by Butterworth, indicating that evidence of "object permanence" shows up by 4 months; that infants of about 2 months adjust their own line of gaze in response to a shift of caretaker's gaze, then refine use of such cues progressively (pp. 67-68, 72-76), until, at about 18 months, self-other reference has been "extended...to a represented space" within which the infant conceives self and objects and other people "to be co-located" (p. 74). Bruner's essay, Dunn's, and Light's all contain passages roundly upsetting the lore about egocentrism. The infant or young child does, of course, reveal an experientially derived *point of view*, and consensus remains that early in life, perspective-taking is tied to the realm of familiar experiences. But neither infant nor youngster is in the nearly solipsistic bubble of which we heard for so long.

Incidentally, Butterworth's article should be of special interest to behaviorists. He reads the newer picture of the "highly competent" infant/child as buttressing Gibson's theory of perception--as well as establishing that the infant's discriminatory repertoire in the first year is grounded significantly in perceptual acquisitions (pp. 66-72). Note that before it became widely established that Piaget

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had overstated the dependence of early cognitions on motor exploration, Whitehurst and Vasta (1977, chap. 5) had elaborated early perceptual learning in a similar way. No reference to their account appears in the Bruner-Haste collection.

*Making Sense* presents evidence that young children are canny, pragmatic artists when it comes to luring adults into involvement with them, reading subtle social signals, and pursuing power advantages within the family group (pp. 3 ff.; 30-31, 38). Clearly, Bruner and Haste expect the reader to be surprised (p. 3), for typical psychologists' portraits of children seem all unsuspecting of such artful precocity. I am among those who have always been bothered by threads in mainstream child psychology that have oversentimentalized the child, and if findings such as the ones mentioned will help temper that fault, well and good. It is amusing, however, that it has taken so many decades for child psychologists to uncover a hard-nosed respect for the intricate outcomes of very early learning in the social sphere. *Aside* from the mainstream, such a perspective has been available for a long time. The followers of Adler's school described these outcomes with exquisite insight (e.g., Dreikurs & Soltz, 1964), attributing them explicitly to the subtleties of early learning, although Adlerians never studied just how learning occurs. Behavior analysts, steadily enriching their findings about how learning does happen, have by now built up an account of such astonishing intricacy that there need remain no mystery about why even the young and naive human being can display a social repertoire that may appear cleverly attuned to the doings of others. (*Making Sense* includes not a word that recognizes this tradition.)

To sum up the bright side, the Bruner-Haste volume re-legitimizes the idea that development is embedded in social and cultural context. It presents infant and child in a "can-do" light, i.e., a light in fair agreement with behavior analysts' long-standing conception of the normal child as establishing an early, extensive adaptive repertoire. The book firmly corrects the conception of infancy and early childhood as a period of gross egocentrism. It begins to acknowledge that the very young child can be an adept observer and manager of others.

*Making Sense* disappoints us in two main ways. First, residual concepts of agency hang on. In a fascinating treatment of self as originating in concrete person-other interactions--set within subculture and in turn within culture--Bruner argues effectively for rejecting all notions of an "ineffable...inherently individualistic Self... determined by the universal nature of man, and...beyond culture" (p. 85). At the same time he wants to retain a poorly specified "executive process" as "necessary to effect" the transactions that give rise to the self (p. 86). While Bruner and Haste hold that development as a solo, autonomous process is a flawed Western preoccupation (p. 9), agency terms such as "self-direction"--along with the usual implied causal arrows--pepper the book, without any reasonable suggestions about how the fine grain of socializer-child exchange produces conduct that can be called self-direction (pp. 13-14, 108 ff.).

I have been curious, by the way, about why Vygotsky's notion of mind,

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seeming to suggest its wholly public origin, has risen now to considerable prominence in developmental literature, and derivative literature such as educational psychology texts (e.g., Gage & Berliner, 1988). One suspects that Vygotsky's references to the development of individual mental structures out of cultural tools, structures that then feed the next bit of socio-history, lend his philosophy just enough flavor of agency to save it from the fate assigned to radical behaviorism--the fate of being rejected out of horror, then distorted sufficiently to make the rejection appear sensible to all reasonable persons.

The second disappointment: We must note once more that learning principles remain in bad odor among too many mainstream psychologists. Contributors to *Making Sense* almost never refer to learning processes as a part of cognitive development. DeLoache and Brown are the exception -- the only index references to learning are to their article--and these writers are at pains to mark off the self-initiated, self-generated learning strategies of under-5 youngsters from traditional conceptions of learning, which DeLoache and Brown *assume* to entail "passive" responding (pp. 110, 120 ff.)! Elsewhere in the volume, processes once called learning are called something else. Children do not acquire rules; Haste says they "grow into" rules. Children do not learn concepts or meanings; they construct them or co-construct them (*passim*). The "growing-into" process is conceived by Bruner as due to "experience rather than...[to] learning" (p. 88), and also as "reflecting a natural organization of mind" with which human beings come equipped (p. 88). Here Bruner appears to assume that the term "learning" entails the silly position that the learning organism somehow lacks both initial species characteristics and genetic uniqueness.

Thus the myth that when people learn they do so passively, and the myth that students of learning fail to respect biological reality, are both notoriously alive and well here. It is as if these wacky notions had never been cleared away by, say, Bijou and Baer (1961, pp. 9 ff., 42-43; Bijou, 1976, pp. 90-91), or by others. Bruner's odd "rather-than" passage is unaccompanied by any statement that would clarify how--even given the standard mainstream definition of learning as relatively enduring changes in behavior due to experience--he can justify setting experience and learning so sharply apart.

Neglect of the corpus of learning scholarship is discouraging in this book as it has been elsewhere. Today, many typical texts register skepticism about the biological metaphors underlying Piaget's account of cognition (e.g., Sarafino & Armstrong, 1980; Gage & Berliner, 1988), often come down just where behaviorists always did on the old "training-studies" controversy (e.g., Gage & Berliner, 1988, p. 120), and portray individuals' intellectual development as too spotty, uneven, and domain-specific to support the Piagetian model well (Conger & Peterson, 1984, p. 165; Gage & Berliner, 1988, pp. 120-121). In the book under review, Feldman backs up such evaluations (pp. 132-133). Yet in none of these works have I seen any acknowledgement of the fact that behavior analysts took these positions long ago.

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### A MAINSTREAM WORK ON MORAL DEVELOPMENT

Eisenberg and Mussen's distinguished assessment of findings on moral development provides meaty reading for behaviorists, because (a) *behavior* is taken throughout as the main matter of interest; (b) the authors are far more willing than are the *Making Sense* contributors to talk forthrightly and often about *learning* as a key part of the stream of ethical development; (c) the authors take an *inductive*, cautious stance toward bewildering masses of data; and (d) in one book, those interested in advancing a behavior-analytic account of ethical conduct can find a *comprehensive* treatment of what mainstream writers consider salient.

Eisenberg and Mussen's argument that moral-development analyses must return behavior to center stage is well made (pp. 4-6). The authors understand and include a number of critical points that learning psychologists have made over the years about moral conduct—for example, that situational factors matter; that intra-individual variations in relevant conduct (as well as inter-individual variations) require due attention; that stage psychologies of morality have been largely psychologies of verbalizations (hence are severely limited); that relationships between verbalizations (such as Kohlbergian judgments) and behavior often are not large (pp. 54, 124, 129). One variant of learning theory (cognitive social learning theory) is accorded a respected place among today's theoretical formulations. Conduct benefiting others is set much more in cultural and subcultural context (chaps. 1, 4), and related more to specific socialization practices (chaps. 6, 7) than followers of Kohlberg would find suitable. The upshot is a volume that places Kohlberg's work in a sharp critical light, after it has been treated elsewhere for so long as the centerpiece of moral-development findings. The cool balance provided by *Roots* is a Good Thing.

### PERSPECTIVES

Thus are the cognitive-developmental theories passing from fashion. Appropriately, their status as broad and interesting descriptions of certain cognitive and verbal behavior remains. For instance, in *Making Sense*, Haste points to several psychologists who in the 1980s evaluated Piaget's conceptions as "adequate description" (p. 172), description that nevertheless poses serious interpretative difficulties. Note that this judgment closely resembles the stance that behavior analysts and allied colleagues have taken toward the cognitive-developmental theories all along (Bijou, 1976, pp. 2-3, 9-10; Whitehurst & Vasta, 1977, p. 17), a stance that Bruner—probably independently?—shared from an early date (see Phillips & Kelly, 1975, p. 366). What is important is that these early cautions have now become common mainstream wisdom.

*Mainly*, though, Piagetian and Kohlbergian formulations have been shoved from the limelight because they were pointed toward universals seemingly ripped

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out of history and biography. In *Making Sense*, Haste and others judge that these theories "have no room" for an analysis of human development set in societal context and approached via broad interdisciplinary tools (p. 174, *passim*). I find it enormously encouraging that this book, and *Roots*, plant the developing person right back into the socio-cultural stream. Conceivably, behavior analysts of development who hope to connect their work with general child psychology may find today's milieu more comfortable than it has been.

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