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Reflections on Piaget's sociological studies

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Abstract

Reflecting on Piaget's recently translated collection of sociological studies, we highlight some salient points in his approach to sociological issues. At the same time we attempt to explain the contrast between Piaget's singular influence in cognitive and developmental psychology with nothing comparable in empirical sociology. We believe that our own social research is a genuine continuation of what had remained on a speculative level in Piaget. One of us focused on the constructive, the other on the interrelational aspect of Piaget's thought. © 2000 Published by Elsevier Science Ltd.

A recent English translation of sociological writings composed by Piaget (1970, 1995a) during the years 1928–1960 provides the opportunity to reflect on Piaget's fertile thought as it relates to the human social reality. We as authors of these reflections are aware that our contact with Piaget's thought started early in our research career, nearly 40 years ago, when together we explored the thinking potential of profoundly deaf children. These children seemed to lack a cognitive tool available to all other healthy children, namely, the mastery of a conventional language, whether it was in the form of English or the American Sign Language. (Nearly all of these deaf children came from hearing parents and were intentionally kept away from the deaf community.) "Thinking without language", the title of the book summarizing our first years of research (Furth, 1966), sounded almost contradictory to contemporary scholars who considered human language as the direct or indirect foundation of thinking. Indeed, you could say that for many scholars knowledge was likened to something like an interiorized dictionary of a language.

In this context, Piaget was the welcome exception. In his theory, knowledge was treated as an action, that is, an active know-how. For Piaget, the development of thinking had its source in the coordination of actions and was described as a gradual construction on the part of the child. It included above all the construction of

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cognitive tools (such as the mature logical framework) and communicative tools (such as the acquisition of a societal language). In this perspective, logical thinking is not directly dependent on knowing a language. If anything, it is the other way around: societal relations are the preconditions of a societal language. In any case, the development of normal thinking in children without mastery of a conventional language was no problem within Piaget's theoretical framework. In fact, we believe that our research with deaf people is a strong confirmation of the soundness and fertility of his overall theoretical approach to knowledge.

It is generally recognized that Piaget's research consistently had an epistemological focus. This means that even in the one field where he turned most consistently to empirical evidence — the intellectual development of the child — he was always more concerned with theoretical questions about the general nature of knowledge than with the specific psychology of the child. Thus, he was not really interested in studying what we would call individual differences, even though he observed them in his three children and generally took them for granted. His paramount strategy of exploring knowledge was to observe how children change and move from a less to a more comprehensive manner of knowing. Observation of these changes in the active use of knowledge gave Piaget a basis and a check for answering epistemological questions which motivated his research in the first place.

This strategy resulted in a multitude of new psychological insights related to the nature of knowledge. We would like here to single out three notions, both because they are insightful for knowledge itself and also because in our estimation they are fundamental for an understanding of human social reality. What Piaget calls the “permanent object” is in fact nothing else but the origin of what for lack of a better word we refer to as “mental” reality (in contrast to present sensorimotor reality). The second related notion of note is Piaget's explanation of how children come to construct “mental signifiers” or “symbols” (again, in contrast to sensorimotor “action signifiers” or “signals”). Observing the development of his own three children, Piaget described how these two capacities — the formation of mental objects and mental symbols — were gradually acquired by the end of the second year. And third, there is Piaget's notion of “operation” as a general framework that puts some degree of logical order into the children's mentality. This logical framework, on account of its generality and felt necessity, permits a meaningful sharing of mental objects and symbols within children's social world.

Our first impression in examining Piaget's explicit investigation into sociality is the contrast between the riches of new insights that Piaget's theory was able to engender in the psychological field and the relative poverty in the sociological field; or perhaps it would be better to put it in terms of abstractness. With the single exception of one small empirical study concerning children's idea of homeland (Chapter 7) — and this has more to do with a child's social *knowledge* than with social *reality* — all the writings in this volume are on a theoretical and speculative level. Quite different from the many psychological studies undertaken by him and his school, there are no empirical observations of constructing social reality. Even more surprising, Piaget's notion of genetic constructivism, the rock bottom of his entire research, is nowhere applied to human society as such.

Compare how differently Piaget treated the “object” of logic or of language from the “object” of society. In the first case, Piaget did not consider these objects as simply given and outside the person; on the contrary, he treated the acquisition of logic or of a societal language as a construction, or as we would prefer to say, a coconstruction on the part of children. In the case of society and socialization, however, Piaget never managed to treat society as anything else than as something more or less given and presupposed. He could go so far as to refer to the construction of social *knowledge* but did not seem to be able to refer to the construction of the system of activities making up a society as readily as he referred to the active construction of logic or societal language.

In a citation where the American Psychological Association (1970) honored Piaget it was said that he had pursued psychology somewhat “as a byproduct” of his principal epistemological interests. He would refer to this — with tongue in cheek — when he was being criticized for not paying enough attention to individual or cultural differences. His standard answer was: “I am only interested in what is most general or universal in all people”, somewhat as a scientist investigating the nature of some biological or physical entity would first abstract from occasional and local variations and only later pay attention to these. Now, what is more general than, on the one hand, the logical framework of knowledge, and, on the other, the societal relations within which all people live and know?

Along this line Piaget felt that “as a byproduct” he was, at least in his early years, studying sociological as much as psychological problems. In fact, from 1925 until 1951, Piaget occupied several professional positions in sociology. Moreover, from 1939 until 1952 he was affiliated with the school of economics in Geneva. It was only in the 1940s that his psychological contributions took on the truly unique character by which his work is now known. That was due in large part to the increasing help of psychological associates, such as Bärbel Inhelder and others who provided a massive amount of empirical studies, underpinning and enriching his theoretical pre-occupations.

The writings collected in the present volume reflect, in fact, the sociological assignments that occupied Piaget for many years early in his career. They cover the years 1928–1951, with the last summary chapter written in 1960, a testimony to his abiding interest in sociological problems. As we said earlier, with one exception these papers are all purely theoretical. It seems worth while to reflect why it is that, in sociology, Piaget could not find the empirical support and applications for his epistemological concerns that he found plentifully in psychology. Actually, Piaget took pride in seeing himself an empirical scientist. He propagated the seemingly contradictory notion of a new discipline of *genetic epistemology*, which would be, as it were, an empirical theorizing about knowledge. In addition to psychology and sociology, we could mention other empirical fields to which Piaget turned in support of his theoretical work, such as biology and evolution, history of scientific thought, psychopathology and above all, education. It was, after all, in education that Piaget’s influence spread most widely here in the United States.

How did Piaget himself connect sociology to his life-long quest regarding the nature of knowing, where the notion of knowing stretched from the biological realm of

adaptation (that is, an organism knowing how to survive in a given milieu) to the sociological realm of human and scientific knowledge? Before his time, French sociologists and philosophers, such as Comte and Durkheim, had first approached the theoretical question as to what should be considered first: Is it the individual who is first and then, as a collectivity, forms a society, or is society first, which then forms the individual? Implicit within this question is the epistemological issue about the relation of society and human knowledge. It is at this point that Piaget made the connection between sociology and epistemology.

Followers of Durkheim emphasized the social nature of knowledge and accordingly considered society as the ultimate source of knowledge. They treated knowledge as a *social* reality, as located in society. It would be acquired by the individual somewhat the way (they thought) language is acquired. On the other side, were those who thought of knowledge as a psychological reality, a capacity and possession within the individual, as for instance, the visual capacity which belongs to the individual and can be ascribed to society only in a figurative sense. Piaget, as usual, rejected both extremes of what can be called sociologism and psychologism and suggested a third way, a *tertium quid*. In this manner he attempted to clarify the constructive processes of knowledge as well as of society.

Thought is the result of action and society [too] is essentially a system of activities, in which [the] elementary interactions consist, literally, in actions reciprocally modifying each other according to certain laws of organization or equilibrium: technical actions; moral and legal actions of cooperation or constraint and oppression; economic actions of production and distribution; intellectual actions of communication, team research or reciprocal criticism — in short, collective construction and the coordination of operations Piaget (1995b, p. 41).

Basically, Piaget rejected the very question that derives from the presupposition of a prior existence of society and of thought and then asks how these two entities relate. As he said: “In fact, there is no society: there are social processes, some generative of rationality ... ; likewise, there are no individuals; there are individual mechanisms of thought, some generating logic ... ” (p. 199). Or in another place (p. 136): “The primary fact is neither the individual nor the set of individuals (society) but the relationship among individuals”. Quite literally, for Piaget, society, just as knowledge, is never something pre-given; rather, it is continually being constructed, or better, co-constructed as a relationship between persons-in-society. This “language based on relations between individuals or individuals in groups (society)” (p. 188) is the same notion as what he referred to in the first quote (p. 41) as “interactions reciprocally modifying each other”. Piaget stressed that he speaks “advisedly of personal relationships because this does not take us out of the inter-individual realm and does not in any case get us into the purely internal ‘human nature’ of classical systems of psychology” (p. 81).

We ourselves have found this relational-constructive approach generative in our social-psychological research and applicable in directions that Piaget himself

unfortunately never followed up. This blockage is in large part due, we believe, to Piaget's well known, (can we say?) almost obsessive, preoccupation with logic and epistemology. And here — in answer to a question asked earlier — we put the finger on the reason why Piaget's work could find fertile applications in the field of child development and the psychology of knowledge (cognitive psychology) but not in sociology. After all, granted that logical structures form only a part, they are nevertheless, an important part in the intellectual development of a child and can readily be observed in empirical studies. However, to assume logical structures at the base of society — as Piaget tries to do in every single article of this volume — seems to us a futile attempt that cannot reach the nature of societal relations. To use a more charitable language, we would say simply that in Piaget's work, while logical structures turned out to be a good way to clarify a child's intellectual development, it was probably not a good way to approach society and, most definitely not, interpersonal relations.

Piaget's constructivist approach: One of us took Piaget's constructive theory seriously and applied it at first to children's comprehension of society, or to use the children's language, the world of grown-ups (Furth, 1980). In this research children between ages of five and 11 years were interviewed; a sequence of four Piaget-like stages of comprehension was suggested and related to the child's developing intellectual capacities and interests. The children's understanding of the working of a retail store and the generating of profit was a key element in their societal grasp. In this connection, the intellect alone was seen as insufficient to explain a child's progress in societal comprehension, although it clearly played an important role. In particular, the study highlighted what was called 'developmental experiences', where children felt uncomfortable with potentially conflicting ideas about their societal reality. These occasions became the motivating moments to spark new interests and search for new insights. On the negative side, the research itself treated society as something outside the children's own social life, as an object of knowledge rather than as something the children themselves did. In this significant respect it was limited to the same extent as was, as we suggested earlier, Piaget's own approach to sociological questions.

The connection between knowledge and interest provided the motivation to explore more fully the psychology of Piaget's 'permanent object'. In *Knowledge as Desire*, Furth (1987) presented Piaget's mental object of *knowledge* as being at the same time what Freud called a libidinal object of desire. In other words, the psychological connection between cognitive structures and libidinal desires was seen as present and necessary from the very birth of mental life, both in the evolutionary history of humanity and the developmental history of each child. Every mental object of a child implies a subjective 'want-my-object', even as every mental desire implies a logically structured object. This is the psychological configuration in which, as it were, the mind of each developing child proliferates in the formation of mental objects and symbols.

But how does this ability to form mental objects and symbols — or, what is the same thing — the ability to form mental desires relate to society? At this point, it occurred to one of us that society is not a notion or quality that is added from *outside* to a given mental object; rather *the mental object is by itself a societal object*, such that

the concrete origin of human society is to be found in the very structure that Piaget described as the ‘permanent object’. This equation of *mental object* = *libidinal object* = *societal object* seems to us to be very much in line with Piaget’s own thinking. After all, what else could be the meaning of statements, such as “Sociogenesis and psychogenesis are two inseparable aspects of any existing formation” (p. 35) or “the essential identity of the operations, distinctive of the intellectual work of individuals, and those which intervene in an inter-individual exchange (or ‘co-operation’)” (p. 23)?

If logical progress goes hand in hand with progress in socialization, is it because children become capable of rational operations due to that social development makes them capable of cooperation; or, on the contrary, is it because their individual logical acquisitions permit them to understand other people and thus lead to cooperation? Since the two sorts of progress go completely hand in hand, the question seems to have no solution except to say that they constitute two indissociable aspects of a single reality that is at once social and individual (p. 145).

Accordingly one of us set out to investigate the beginning of mental life with the aim of discovering ‘societal’ features in the play, the fantasy, and the peer interactions of very young children (Furth, 1996). The word ‘societal’ is here used advisedly to refer to the distinguishing characteristics of human societies over and above the social fact of inter-individual interactions as can be found in all so-called higher animals, which also happen to have a period of childhood and therefore developmental acquisitions. Here is a list of the main societal features that we could observe by interpreting the speech and interactions of the children: shared presuppositions and values; traditions, customs, and history; rules and obligations; consensus and respect; use of pretense to facilitate social interactions. If we were asked to compress these various feature as the key to an understanding of human societies. This feature implies, on the one hand, the logical know-how to form mental objects and symbols (as described in Piaget’s work), and, on the other hand, the desire to do so (as described in Freud’s work). The result of this interplay of logical know-how and libidinal desire is, we believe, at the origin of human societies.

It is curious that Piaget failed to see the societal nature of the *developed* symbol ability, even where he expressly emphasized the *nascent* symbolic function and collaboration in chimpanzees and the connection of *operator* and *societal* structures.

But although we can see, in every constituted society, that the modes of exchange of thought correspond to the level of thought itself, without it being possible to tell which is cause and which is effect in this circular process, the most important period of all is lost to view: that which extends between the primal horde, comparable to troupes of anthropoid monkeys, and organized society possessing collective techniques and an articulated language. In chimpanzees, the most social of all anthropoids, there is a nascent symbolic function, and a certain degree of collaborative action, but the essential act of intelligence remains sensorimotor, with neither operatory nor social structuring, imitation,

in particular, remains, as in the baby, subordinated to sensorimotor intelligence (p. 85).

And Piaget continued here by contrasting the fist fights of non-humans with the metallic weapons of the first humans: “It is between the [anthropoid’s] punch and Neolithic man’s working of metals that we should seek the interplay of technical progress, communication by verbal signals, and the transformations of intelligence . . .” (p. 85). This seems true enough. But Piaget should not neglect — what he would be the first one to emphasize — that the transformation from sensorimotor to object intelligence has its developmental origin in the ability to form mental objects long before the formation of fully developed operations. Consequently, human society too must have its developmental origin in these abilities. He said so much in the following:

If the equilibrium of thought has its root in the biological reality of a balance between accommodation to the milieu and assimilation of the external world, it is only in socialized awareness that this balance becomes an equilibrium and results in . . . valid norms. Although it is pointless to try to split an adult into individual and social elements, it is at the same time necessary when one asks at what point the infant becomes socialized (p. 194).

Here and in subsequent pages Piaget came close to specifying *at what point the infant becomes socialized*. But with a somewhat flippant attitude (“This essay does not pretend to be precise in advancing our knowledge, but to constitute a general attitude and may, therefore, have some heuristic value” p. 211, Note [2].) and with his epistemological preoccupations, he could not find any ‘real’-read: ‘logical’-value in ‘pre-logical’ symbolic thought, “dictated only by individual desire” (p. 195). Thus he was in no position to notice the positive relational and “society-instituting” value of symbols where society is succinctly specified, as we said above, by the sharing of symbols.

In the next article Piaget again stressed the origin of societal reality in the mind of children: “So then, if in their first year children begin by being social only in the biological and ‘internal’ sense of the word, they become increasingly more socialized throughout the following years, in the sense of a society ‘external’ to individuals” (p. 217). In the language of Furth (1996), it is the child who during the sensorimotor period has acquired the object- and symbol-ability, for whom society becomes ‘external’ in the sense of action-separated. In a Piagetian constructivist manner, this would be the point of a first societal construction in the form of a ‘mental object of desire’.

Piaget’s relational approach: While one of us thus enlarged on Piaget’s constructivist approach to sociological issues, the other, focusing on Piaget’s study of moral judgment, explored his interpersonal and interrelational approach. Although that work had been represented in various ways by Kohlberg, on the one hand, and Bandura and Flavell, on the other hand, an interpretation more in keeping with Piaget’s essential epistemology remained untapped. Focus was given to Piaget’s

argument that morality consisted in respect for persons rather than in respect for law (pp. 301–302). When confronted with a difference of viewpoints, the mature response was not to take refuge in logical reasoning, but to submit to the norms of reciprocity and communication so that each party expressed a view while listening to the other's view (Piaget, 1932/1965). The present book of essays shows just how central this theme was in Piaget's thinking and how persistently he repeated it over the years in his exploration of society, law, culture, and history: "Mutual respect grows out of exchanges among individuals who consider one another as equals" (p. 314).

To study these ideas, we asked children to describe the processes by which they developed respect for persons. In a series of studies, we explored the two forms of relationship that Piaget had postulated as fundamental to moral growth, children's relationship of unilateral authority with adults and children's relationship of cooperation with peers and friends (Youniss, 1980; Youniss & Smollar, 1985). Unbeknownst to us at the time, Damon (1977) had launched a similar quest. Not surprisingly, our independent findings coincided and helped to recover a major theme that had been neglected in Piagetian studies for several decades. For what it is worth, this approach to morality through the development of two relationships leading to mutual respect may offer a way to see in another light some of the problems that come from viewing Piaget as a theorist who explains morality through solitary cognitive development (Youniss and Damon, 1992).

As this work was evolving, two other developments arose within the discipline that gave this work special relevance. One was a rebirth in interest in peer relationship, in contrast to the historic emphasis on parents, and the other was the rediscovery of Vygotsky's writings about the social origins of thought. As to the former, Piaget may be seen as offering a clear epistemological basis for the uniqueness of peer interactions. For example, "... The specific source of morality is the affective and cognitive reciprocity or 'mutual respect' that bit by bit disengages itself from unilateral respect" (p. 314). In principle, these interactions are between equals, who must make mutual cooperative adjustments, if they are to get along. Being equals, for example, in authority and power, peers are likely to run into loggerheads if they did not cooperate. Although peers reciprocate in a symmetrical fashion, they avoid stalemate by treating one another as they themselves would wish to be treated. Thus, were one to harm the other, the other would refrain from retaliation so as to get relations back on track and allow positive reciprocation to move ahead.

One can see how basic this idea is to Piaget's general approach through an analogy to Piaget's better known work on children's understanding of impersonal time, space, and the like. Consider the case, say, of a child playing with a ball, which is equivalent to a peer partner. The child, as it were, says to the ball: "I bet when I set you down on this table, you will sit still". The ball responds: "No I won't; I will roll off onto the floor". The child then says: "When I throw you across the room, you are going to roll into the far corner". The ball says: "OK, throw me and see". And so this dialogue between equals continues through a series of mutual adjustments that are paced, of course, by the child's assimilative initiatives. One might carry this analogy further, say, with contrasting interactions between a child and an automobile to which the child is in a unilateral relationship as a complementary actor. This would be similar to the

interactions shaping child-adult relationships where the adult has unilateral authority. The child in turn tries to understand this authority by taking a complementary stance.

Viewed thus, the supposed gap between Piaget and Vygotsky tends to narrow even to the point of overlap and similarity. Beginning with the 1932 study of moral judgment Piaget was clear about giving society and interpersonal interaction constituting power over the individual. The present essays make that point repeatedly, as Piaget regularly describes the social basis of the child's thought both as outcome and as process. For instance, in considering possible ways in which thought is formed (p. 305), Piaget, as we pointed out earlier, rejects outright determination of the individual by society and construction of society by society-disconnected individuals. Instead, he adopts a "third solution [which] is that mental life is constructed in conjunction with the group" (p. 305). Indeed, once this point is accepted, it becomes nearly impossible to view the child as a lone agent who imagines what the world might be like and then gingerly tests out ideas in action. The child described and implied throughout the present essays is bound to meet resistance from other persons who have independent intentions. The key, then, is to work toward cooperation so that thought develops through a joint fashion in interpersonal interactions which are "instruments of exchange" (p. 305). Unless a child were autistic, it is not possible to reject the feedback that other's actions provide to one's own actions. This is why Piaget (1965, p. 34) argued forcefully that social life begins in the first year when the child's actions and intentions are thwarted by the contingent actions of caretakers. He repeated this 20 years later: "...human intelligence is subject to the action of social life at all levels of development from the first to the last day of life" (p. 278).

Two other ideas follow directly from the above. One concerns egocentrism, one of the most distracting notions that has plagued constructive interpretations of Piaget's writings. From his 1932 study of moral judgement through his 1970 essay in the *Manual of Child Psychology*, Piaget distinguished two forms of egocentrism. One, which can be called "natural", refers to the very young child's inability to differentiate actions of self from actions of the other. But Piaget referred to another and more persistent kind of egocentrism, which in the 1970 essay, he admits, he might better have termed *sociocentrism*. Piaget recognized the trouble the term egocentrism has caused: "Unfortunately, words being stronger than definitions in psychology, people have often taken what we have said about egocentrism in the everyday and affective sense of the term which makes everything we said false" (p. 306).

Egocentrism is an expression of the child's operative understanding so that "the internal operations of the individual and the interpersonal coordination of points of view constitute a single and the same reality, at once intellectual and social" (p. 307). Egocentrism, then, is a product of the form of interaction of which persons partake. This is why in *Moral Judgement* Piaget attributed egocentric understanding to the unilateral form in which parents instruct young children about a rule. Even as the children consciously attempt to understand the rule, the form of interaction prevents a meshing of views. Thus, although they realize there are different perspectives, they cannot understand the perspective form which the parents are operating, and in

striving for an interpretation, they come up with a version that conforms to a reality as they know or understand it.

Think of a boy wanting to wear his favorite raggedy and dirty clothes to the first day of Kindergarten. The parents want the child to wear a clean shirt and tie. The boy could not possibly comprehend the parents' intention, which includes impressing the teacher and parents of the other students. No doubt he will wear the outfit his parents want him to wear, but he also will have his own child-based interpretation for it. Something should be learned from the fact that this example, as every example Piaget gave for egocentrism in *Moral Judgment*, pertains to adult-child interactions. The adult does not clearly communicate a perspective while, in turn, the child fails to grasp the adult's perspective. For Piaget (1932/1965, p. 34) this misunderstanding is a normal product of unilateral relations.

Piaget also considered it normal that children realize adults have an interpretation they want to convey, even though the children cannot grasp it because of experiential differences. Moreover, the separation of egocentrism from age is attested to by the fact that adult examples of egocentrism are used exclusively in Piaget's (1965) well-known appendix to the English language publication of Vygotsky's *Language and Thought*, recently retranslated (Piaget, 1995a, b). The first example used there is that of a university professor newly graduated, giving lectures in his first course. The professor is lecturing, not to his students, but to imagined colleagues in his chosen academic discipline. In the process of giving this unilateral talk, the professor is effectively not speaking to his students, but in true sociocentric fashion to himself.

These several examples illustrate well the distinction between an egocentrism due to capacity and a sociocentrism due to the form of relationship and the interactive processes that follow. Parents and young professors do not lack for capacity to understand that children or students hold views different from their own. But the process of asymmetry gets in the way to such an extent that adult and child, or teacher and student, despite best efforts, end up with non-communicating perspectives. The failure is not due to capacity, that is, ignorance about view points but due to lack of coordinating operations on the part of both persons.

The last idea to be considered here is brought out in our current research on the emergence of moral concepts through adolescents' interactions with others in community service. This work was started in an attempt to avoid the abstractness of a morality that was supposed to be founded on private thought and assessed through an individual's reasoned analysis of hypothetical dilemmas. We, therefore, set out to observe adolescents as they dealt with moral issues that came up in the midst of their work at a soup kitchen for homeless people (Yates & Youniss, 1998; Youniss & Yates, 1997). Their service was part of a formal religion class on Christian social justice, whose guiding principle was that everyone has responsibility to use their resources and assets for the common good, especially for those who are in disadvantaged positions. Interestingly, the students themselves were Black, urban, from middle to lower middle SES family background.

Our preliminary assessment was that we were capturing the social formation of moral thinking in an important way. Among other things, in following students through an entire school-year, we were able to observe them raise questions that are

central to a mature and responsible morality. As students closely observed the varieties of homeless people, they asked one another about, for example, the poor quality of education in our schools, the lack of job training programs, the need for residential care for mentally incapacitated persons, safe havens for poor elderly adults, and prison reform for young jobless males. Analyzing students' interactive discussions, we could find no overall bias as such toward either more liberal or conservative stances, but expressions of both and serious efforts toward reconciling differing opinions. For example, when discussing Black teenage mothers who were homeless and surviving on welfare, some students argued that they ought to be in school, learning in order to become self-sufficient; in contrast, others argued that welfare policy ought to encourage these females to work so that they earn enough money to take care of their children rather than depend on public support.

The issues of welfare policy, prison reform, and the like, were not abstract to these youth, but real in the double sense that many knew relatives or acquaintances who faced these problems as part of daily life and saw consequences of these problems in their own experiences at the soup kitchen. In the discussions that were taped throughout the year, we observed a serious effort at coming to understand the moral and political stances that individuals, business, churches, and the government should take toward homelessness and its various correlates. But one may ask, what is particularly moral about these questions, and what is particularly Piagetian in our findings? The answer is seen in the students' own development during the year. Many of the students started the year with stereotypes about homelessness and homeless people. But as they visited the kitchen repeatedly, they came to have three insights which strikingly illustrate Piaget's thinking.

First, students came to see homeless persons as human beings, just like them, their parents, or other acquaintances. For example, in talking with homeless individuals, they came to see that they might have been college graduates who became addicted to drugs, or lost their jobs, or went to prison, like persons that they know in their own neighborhoods. As one student put it, homeless persons are just like my dad, because "they want to get up in the morning for a hot shower, a clean shave, and a big breakfast. They are just human". Second, by interacting with homeless persons, the students came to reflect on their own lives and began to see how fortunate they were in comparison. The taken-for-granted rights of having food, shelter, and people who care about you, shifted in their mind to gifts for which the students were grateful. These two insights lead to the realization of a common humanity as the groundwork for mutual respect on which Piaget predicates mature morality. "Mutual respect grows out of exchanges among individuals who consider one another as equals. It presupposes, first of all, an acceptance of common values, particularly with respect to the exchange itself. Each of the partners appraises the others from the point of view of these values and sticks to their appraisal, so that once again one finds in mutual respect the combination of sympathy and fear belonging to all respect" (p. 314).

A third insight follows from the above. Having established mutual respect with homeless persons, students began to ask what their role could be in stemming homelessness and helping alleviate the problems which homeless people faced. Some students took a personal approach by imagining themselves as advocates for homeless

people. Others viewed themselves as future political activists or, through roles in government, as using political power to create a more moral society in which resources would be used for the common good. This, we suggest, illustrates a position Piaget advocated nearly six decades ago. He suggested that once relationships of cooperation were developed, they would be projected more generally and become a guide for moral political positions on the part of a society that honors respect among its people. “The most authentic products of reciprocal morality are the construction of distributive justice and the tendency to moderate retributive justice in the name of fairness ... Authority leads to obedience without leading to correlative rights, whereas justice leads to a balance of obligations and rights that is all the more exact because the right of one of the partners is identically equal to the other’s obligation” (p. 315–316).

We believe our work of the past 20 years attests to the generative power of Piaget’s basic constructivist epistemology and the fundamental identity of inter-individual and intra-individual coordination. We both feel fortunate to have followed this perspective on Piaget and been able to extend his thinking to interesting and, we believe, important problems. It is remarkable that Piaget himself was able to persist in his own empirical and theoretical work for six decades, continually finding new questions of worth to address. We consider our work as an extension of that effort and hope that it inspires others to carry this tradition of research into the next century. Categorizing Piaget’s contributions, judging orthodoxy, and the like, are not at issue. The aim is to build on a framework that Piaget instituted in order to understand development while honestly addressing basic questions of psychology, sociology, biology, and even philosophy.

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