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### Theorization and Relationships with Time: Some Reflections

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#### Abstract

In this commentary, I would like to know more details of the role of temporality and the social dimension of the body in Piaget’s early works, notably on the content of the notebooks written by Piaget and his wife, Valentine. Through diachronic-synchronic concepts drawn from linguistics, I propose a discussion of the methodological problems of Piaget's observation method, as presented by Ratcliff. In principle, taking a look at the methodological steps through these concepts could greatly contribute to the reflection on Piaget’s units of analysis and thus to his interpretation of the emergence and coordination of the multimodality of skills.

1 Marc Ratcliff presents important elements allowing us to understand the beginning of the theoretical construction of Piaget's work. I was extremely interested in and even impressed by the details of how Piaget constructed his units of analysis. However, some doubts emerged along my reading about how Piaget’s longitudinal approach was organized in his notes. I will try to organize them in order to discuss the role of temporality and the social dimension of the body presented by the author.

2 Time was not the object of Piaget’s interests. Centrally, at least. But it is important to highlight that this dimension crosses his work and Ratcliff provides us with a substantial attempt to open the discussion and take a look at his early and classical works through the temporal category. The distinction between diachronic-synchronic dimensions — which was developed in 1916 by Ferdinand de Saussure (1974), who promoted the development of linguistics as a science — is a useful approach taken in social research to understand the construction of units of analysis. Basically, the aim of studies with a synchronic approach is to set up “the fundamental principles of any idiosyncratic system” (de Saussure 1974: 101), while the goal of the diachronic approach is the development of a unit across time. The first one pays attention to the structural features, characteristics, differences, and similarities between units at a given point of time, offering a rich description across different units, whereas the second one produces descriptions paying attention to the emergence of a unit and its historical transformations. The questions of research on a permanent change and its stability over time can gain in depth with these temporal divisions of the same phenomenon.

3 The method elaborated by Piaget to observe the development of the infant was focused on the body, but the way it was

http://constructivist.info/14/1/073.ratcliff
carried out points to the relation to time adopted in his research. It seems clear that Jean and Valentine Piaget wrote thoroughly about their observations of a chosen unit (hand, thumb, smile, gaze, etc.) in terms of its recurrence (§9, 12) in a space of time often mentioned when the behaviour was visible (“sucked it from the first days”; “for several months, to fall asleep” §7; “14 June. Same experiment” §9). This way of proceeding suggests that the emergence of a behaviour was conceived of as occurring across time. Little by little, the units came into contact by extending network around a behavior.

4 This network around a behaviour, for instance sleep (§7), is described in such a way that we do not see the role of parents’ actions in its emergence (the pillow that they put in the cradle). This is an important element, in my opinion, and it becomes invisible because of the diachronic focus. Just as the role of other fine motor coordination is invisible that preceded, accompanied or did not accompany the behaviour of “sleep” with the cushion. In §17, when Ratcliff mentions the horizontal and vertical criteria according to which Piaget considered an element as stable – for instance the imitation – it is not clear to me, apart from the criterion of stable repetition, how Piaget delimited the beginning and ending of the network indicating the behavior in a vertical way. What kinds of gestures precede imitation? Does imitation begin when the gaze starts causing the gestures and movements imitated? Does it end when the baby disinvests its gaze, which would be followed by a change in gestures? What kinds of gestures mark the end of imitation? Do sounds play a role? What about the discourse of the imitated adult who encourages imitation? Do the prosodic properties of her voice attract and keep the baby’s attention? All those questions about delimited actions and the framework in which they emerge could help substantiate these units in their verticality. In contrast to contributing to negative stereotypes of Piaget’s research, it should encourage the reproduction of these devices by giving serious consideration to the role of these temporal divisions that surround the studied social phenomenon.

5 The importance of knowing the methodological steps that lead to the theorization of a phenomenon is crucial. Following Bruno Latour (1996: 135), a theory is a final product preceded by practices and, in this way, linked to the means of production that allows it be built up. In this theoretical construction, Piaget tried to articulate new emergence and its stabilization in time as a novel higher-level skill co-existing and coordinating with skills already existing at some lower level (§22): the conquest of multimodality by the child. In doing this, he constructs his theory by taking a temporal choice close to the linear conception of time.

6 Indeed, contemporary psychology often – perhaps even completely – forgets that age, like longitudinal studies, by the way, remains “a social and cognitive construct” (§36). Since George Herbert Mead (1959) and Émile Durkheim’s work (Durkheim 1960), sociology has addressed the manner in which we think about time, escaping a linear representation, as a collective datum (common understanding about time) and a social category articulating multiple events (past, present and future in the same gesture). The imitation of a gesture – or a sequence of gestures – on the part of a baby is therefore also a matter of the past and the future. Imitation is possible only because the child has seen the gesture on other occasions, often in a ritualized setting. She knows that the gesture has playful implications in the interaction and therefore scope for future applications.

7 Theorization is also a translation of practices into a discourse (Perrenoud 1998). This translation, or this passage, is not a common speech addressed to all audiences. The transition to scientific discourse is concretized by the presentation of elements perceived as an objective construction. The way we express time plays a decisive role.

References


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