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*The Social Development
of the Intellect*

WILLEM DOISE AND GABRIEL MUGNY

Translators:

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in collaboration with Diane Mackie.

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The Social Development of the Intellect

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The Social Development of the Intellect

by

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Foreword

In the field of intelligence, as in other areas in the human sciences, there are several possible approaches to the same phenomenon, each one generating its own explanation. Psychologists and sociologists, for example, resort to numerous analytic frameworks to grasp the various aspects of a complex reality. Thus psychologists are interested in the cognitive organisation that underlies the individual's behaviour, whilst sociologists are more likely to study the dynamics of differentiation which allow some social environments to produce more 'intelligent' children than others. It is not disputed that each of these approaches is legitimate; intelligence is clearly both an organisation of individual behaviour and an institutionalised social characteristic. But if we speak about intelligence in several 'tongues', it still does not seem possible to 'translate' one into the other. It remains for us to interrelate analyses of individual dynamics with those of social dynamics. This is the principal aim of the present work.

The first chapter will consider the limits of different explanatory systems of intelligence. Advancing beyond these limitations will, in the second chapter, call for a social definition of cognitive development. The following chapters will develop and illustrate this social definition of intelligence experimentally. In fact, there are more than twenty experiments to show how social interaction, not only between children, but also between child and adult, can be an especially important context for cognitive development.

This book is intended not only for psychologists and social psychologists, but for all those interested in the cognitive development of individuals. Readers who are unfamiliar with experimentation and with statistical language should not be put off. This book presupposes no profound knowledge of experimental procedures. With regard to statistics, it is sufficient to understand that the normal statistical thresholds (indicated by $P < 0.05$ or 0.01 , for example) refer to a probability of obtaining purely by chance the observed differences between experimental conditions of less than 5% or 1%, when these differences are in the direction hypothesised. In other words, the lower the probability indicated, the greater the certainty with which the differences obtained can be considered as actually resulting from the influence of the experimentally introduced variations between the different conditions.¹

¹All the statistical calculations and subject classifications were redone for this book. We have in some cases adopted new criteria to ensure that the analyses of the different experiments would be comparable. For further information on the statistical tests used, one may refer to Leach (1979). Unless otherwise indicated, the significance levels are for one-tailed tests.

To elaborate a theory of cognitive development is itself, according to the central thesis of this book, a social activity. This work has in fact resulted from a genuine collaboration between the two authors, who have coordinated their efforts with those of A. N. Perret-Clermont (1980a). Le Fonds Suisse de la Recherche Scientifique has made possible much of the research described here, while the published reports have been co-authored with various collaborators (see Table at the end of Chapter 2). They must all be thanked, as must our colleagues at the universities of Auckland (New Zealand), Barcelona (Spain), Bologna (Italy) and Tilburg (Holland), who have suggested variations in our paradigms and have enriched the social conception of intelligence presented here.²

W.D. and G.M.

²We would also like to acknowledge here our thanks to the Department of Public Instruction in Geneva who gave permission for much of the research reported here, to the teachers who allowed us into their classes, and to the pupils who participated in our research.

Preface

One tends to feel almost confused by the richness and diversity of the studies on the psychology of the child that have been and are still being carried out. Some, under the impetus of psychoanalysis, are primarily devoted to the blossoming of the child's affective life as it develops against a background of family relationships. Other studies, extending the work of Piaget, attempt to provide better descriptions, if not explanations, of the mental and moral development of individuals. For the sake of completeness, one may also define a third trend, of mixed origins, which describes in detail the beginnings of the child's principal competencies, its recognition of a face or an object, attachment to the mother or other person and so on. Such studies show marked traces of ethology. However, in spite of the reverses, attacks and critiques to which they have been subjected, the ideas of Piaget still predominate. And at present there is not even a remote sign of their being replaced. But, as in many other current ideas in psychology, there is a gap between declared principles and achievements – or at least, in relation to one principle, that of the social factor. For example, in considering thought or language, it is frequently and variously asserted that these are social phenomena historically generated and incorporated within collective existence. But these assertions having been made, either as introductions or declarations of intent, are then forgotten or at least they never emerge in actual research or in theoretical explanations. This major contradiction marks much of contemporary science. Nevertheless, we do from time to time find researchers who seem to take the social factor seriously and try to reduce the contradiction. One such worker was Labov, who attempted to create a sociolinguistic system which would re-establish language within its position in society. And this is also the case with Doise and Mugny and their coworkers in Geneva, who have sought to identify, within the development of intelligence as described by Piaget, the dynamics of relations which might account for it. Although they are not the first to have contemplated such an identification, they have, so to speak, taken the bull by the horns and achieved much, and with some success. This clear and well-thought-out book contains the results of very remarkable research carried out over several years which we are sure deserves to be made known to a wider public, not only to child psychologists but also to educationalists, sociologists, doctors and indeed all those interested in the development of ideas in this field.

S. MOSCOVICI

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Contents

1	The social significance of the study of intelligence	1
	The Piagetian tradition	4
	The psychometric tradition	8
	Towards a new approach	12
2	A social definition of intelligence	14
	The postulate of the social nature of intelligence	14
	Mead, Piaget and Vygotsky	18
	A new social psychological approach	22
	Research themes	24
	The constructive nature of social interaction	25
	Cognitive prerequisites	26
	The effect of social interaction on individual cognitive development	27
	Sociocognitive conflict	28
	Social developmental constructivism and modelling theory	29
	Social marking	30
	The sociological factor	30
	Conclusions	31
3	The cooperative game and the coordination of interdependent actions	33
	The cooperative game	34
	Task instructions	36
	The circuits	37