

# Piaget's Cognitive Development Theory

by Sophia Tutorial



## WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will cover a topic of psychology with relevance to sociology, through the definition and discussion of:

1. Jean Piaget
2. Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development
  - a. Sensorimotor Stage
  - b. Pre-Operational Stage
  - c. Concrete Operational Stage
  - d. Formal Operational Stage

## 1. JEAN PIAGET

Jean Piaget was a famous psychologist who was interested in the development of human cognition, especially in children. His theories relate to how people are socialized and develop into functioning adults in society, an area of interest to sociologists, which is why they study Piaget's work.

Piaget became interested in this idea of the development of human cognition by observing his own children. He wanted to understand how they came to know the world.

## 2. PIAGET'S THEORY OF COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT

Piaget theorized **four stages of human cognitive development**, which were tied to biological maturity and maturation:

- Sensorimotor Stage
- Pre-Operational Stage
- Concrete Operational Stage
- Formal Operational Stage}}



## TERM TO KNOW

## Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development

A four-stage theory of how cognition, thinking, and reasoning develop in and throughout the lifecourse.

### 2a. Sensorimotor Stage

When you're between the ages of zero and two, you come to know the world primarily through your senses: what you can see, hear, touch, and smell. Piaget maintained that at this first stage, humans are essentially incapable of being anything but self-centered. If you're hungry, feeling that physical sensation of hunger, you'll cry. If you're hot or cold, you'll cry. At this stage, cognition comprises central reactions to the physical environment in terms of taste, touch, smell, sight, and hearing.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

If you have children or have been around young children, have you noticed that they are receptacles of physical need, sensations, and desires? They find a way to make these needs and desires known to you.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Sensorimotor Stage

The stage from birth until about two years old where humans primarily "know" the world through their physical senses of touching, smelling, tasting, seeing, and hearing.

### 2b. Pre-Operational Stage

In this second stage you begin to use symbolic thinking, and use symbols and language. This is where you begin to use language. However, you cannot yet think abstractly; you can only think literally. Also, you can only think from your own experiences. It's difficult to think outside of your experiences categorically.

#### IN CONTEXT

Suppose when you were this age, your favorite food was tortillas--you loved getting tortillas from the local Mexican restaurant. However, if somebody asked you, 'What's your favorite food?', you wouldn't necessarily understand that tortillas fall into the category of Mexican food, and therefore you wouldn't be able to tell that person that you liked Mexican food.

This concept would be too abstract for people in the preoperational stage. Instead, you would say that tortillas are your favorite food. At this preoperational stage, you're not yet capable of that level of abstraction.



#### TERM TO KNOW

#### Preoperational Stage

The stage from ages two to seven where humans learn to use symbols and language.

### 2c. Concrete Operational Stage

This third stage occurs roughly between ages 7 and 11. In this stage you begin to trace out cause and effect relationships. Children understand that if they do one action, another action might happen as a result. They are able to think about how and why things happen, and as a result, they are able to plan better, knowing cause and effect.

Also at this stage, you become better users of symbols.

➦ **EXAMPLE** Suppose your birthday is March 1. At this stage, you can understand that March 1 is A) your birthday, B) it's a Monday, and C) it's the first day of the month of March. You're using three layers of symbolism at the same time, which is something that a child in the preoperational stage would be unable to do, Piaget found.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Concrete Operational Stage

The stage from approximately ages seven to eleven where children learn to recognize cause and effect relationships in their environment.

## 2d. Formal Operational Stage

This is the stage you are in right now. It's the fourth and final stage of human development from about age 12 onward. In this stage you can think abstractly and less literally. You can understand meaning constructed with metaphors and use advanced symbolic representation.

You stay in this stage for life but if something occurs to disrupt someone's progression through the stages, that person may not reach this stage. Not all people advance through every single stage.



#### THINK ABOUT IT

If you're reading a book and you come across a phrase like, "When she walked into the room, his face lit up like the full moon," do you understand its meaning? If you do, then you are able to understand abstract and metaphorical thinking, because this phrase is a metaphor for describing how his face looked in response to the woman walking into the room.

Somebody in a preoperational stage wouldn't understand this--they might think it's gibberish. You, however, in the formal operational stage, are able to understand metaphors and metaphorical thinking, and more abstract, broader, cognitive topics.



#### TERM TO KNOW

### Formal Operational Stage

The stage from approximately age 12 onward where we can think abstractly and use advanced symbolic representation.



#### SUMMARY

Today you learned about psychologist **Jean Piaget** and the **four stages of his theory of cognitive development**.

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Zach Lamb.



## TERMS TO KNOW

### **Concrete Operational Stage**

The stage from approximately ages seven to eleven where children learn to recognize cause and effect relationships in their environment.

### **Formal Operational Stage**

The stage from approximately age 12 onwards where we can think abstractly and use advanced symbolic representation.

### **Piaget's Theory of Cognitive Development**

A four-stage theory of how cognition, thinking, and reasoning develop in and throughout the lifecourse.

### **Preoperational Stage**

The stage from ages two to seven where humans learn to use symbols and language.

### **Sensorimotor Stage**

The stage from birth until about two years old where humans primarily "know" the world through their physical senses of touching, smelling, tasting, seeing, and hearing.