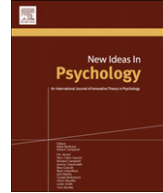




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# The concept of egocentrism in the context of Piaget's theory

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### A B S T R A C T

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In this paper, we trace the origin and development of the concept of egocentrism in Piaget's work. We evaluate a number of criticisms that have been leveled against the concept of egocentrism. Based on our evaluation, we propose a reconceptualization of the concept of egocentrism as a decentering process with different phases that is recapitulated at different stages of development. We provide examples of the decentering process for the sensorimotor, preoperational, concrete-operational, and formal operational stages.

Piaget introduced the concept of egocentrism in his early writings in the 1920s to describe general characteristics of the preschool child. Since its introduction, the concept of egocentrism has received considerable theoretical and empirical attention and has drawn numerous criticisms. Piaget attributed these criticisms to serious misunderstandings of the concept of egocentrism. Indeed, Piaget (1945/1962, p. 285, fn) admitted that the choice of the term egocentrism was "unfortunate", and he apologized (Piaget & Inhelder, 1948/1967, p. 220) for having dwelt on this expression for the last twenty-five years.

In this paper, we trace the origins of the concept of egocentrism in Piaget's writings and examine the subsequent changes to this concept. We examine some of the criticisms leveled against the concept of egocentrism and conclude that the concept of egocentrism remained ambiguous in Piaget's writings. Finally, we suggest a revision of the concept of egocentrism that addresses these ambiguities.

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## 1. The development of the concept of egocentrism in the context of Piaget's work

The roots of the concept of egocentrism can be traced back to Freud's influence on Piaget. While he was in Zurich (1918–1919) and Paris (1919–1921), Piaget studied various schools of psychoanalysis (Freud, Jung, Adler). Based on Freud's concepts of primary process (i.e., the mode of functioning in service of the immediate gratification of needs) and secondary process (i.e., the regulation and control of needs to attend to the demands of reality), Piaget (1920) initially distinguished between autistic and logical, scientific thought, and in 1922 he introduced the concept of egocentrism as an intermediary level between these modes of thought.<sup>1</sup> However, Piaget soon distanced himself from Freud's concept of primary process, and the meticulous study of his own infants led to a thoroughgoing revision of the concept of egocentrism. From the mid-1930s on, egocentrism was conceptualized as a phenomenon that reoccurs at the beginning of different developmental stages.

### 1.1. The Freud connection

During his stay in Paris, Piaget was asked to lecture to the Alfred Binet Society on the topic of psychoanalysis (Harris, 1997; Kesselring, 1999). In his lecture, Piaget (1920) discussed basic concepts of three different psychoanalytic approaches, namely, the theories of Freud, Adler, and the Zurich School of psychoanalysis (i.e., Jung, Pfister). Following Freud, Piaget (1920, p. 23) distinguished between two different modes of thinking: autistic or symbolic thinking, on one hand, and scientific or logical thinking on the other. The concepts of autistic and logical thinking are modeled on Freud's ideas of primary and secondary process. Autistic thinking obeys the pleasure principle and is "personal, incommunicable, ... confused, undirected, indifferent to truth, rich in visual and symbolic schemas, and above all, unconscious of itself and by the affective factors by which it was guided" (1924/1972, pp. 204–205). It is characteristic of "the child, the neurotic person, the dreamer, the artist, and the mystic" (Piaget, 1920, p. 23, our translation). In the conclusion of his discussion of the different psychoanalytic approaches, Piaget (1920, p. 57) suggested that an important task of psychology is to study individual differences in the relations between autistic thought and rational thought:

Autistic thinking that forms personal symbols remains with us throughout our lives. However, its role changes with age. In the child, autism is everything. Later, reason develops at the expense of autism but can reason ever completely shed itself of autistic thinking? It does not appear this way. The task is therefore to create ... a psychology in order to determine in each individual the exact relations between the level of intelligence and the level of autistic or unconscious life (our translation).

The relations between autistic and logical thinking were taken up again by Piaget in a conference presentation at the International Psychoanalytic Conference in Berlin 1922 (Piaget, 1923). However, he now approached the issue from a developmental and not an individual-difference perspective (Harris, 1997). It is in this context that Piaget (1923, p. 284), for the first time, used the concept of egocentrism: Piaget argued that egocentrism is an intermediate or transitional stage between autistic thought and socialized logical thinking. Piaget based this argument on several functional analogies between autistic and egocentric thought. Egocentric thought displays the three core features of autistic thought: it lacks any form of directed logical sequence, it is not conscious of its own processes, and it is dominated by imagery rather than concepts (Piaget, 1923, p. 279). As further commonalities between autistic and egocentric thought Piaget mentioned, among others, that both are individual and not communicable, and lack clear boundaries between ego and alter ego as well as between ego and external world. To explain the commonalities between autistic and egocentric thought, Piaget referred to functional and

<sup>1</sup> Piaget (1920) also used the term "symbolic thought" to refer to the characteristics of autistic thought. As we explain below, Piaget's notion of autistic thought is derived from Bleuler, and is not synonymous with the contemporary use of this term as a designator of a particular developmental disorder.

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