

What Piaget meant by the term egocentrism

Egocentrism occurs in the pre-operational stage (2-6 years approximately). As the roots of the term suggest, it is the perspective in which the child is preoccupied with the self and relatively insensitive to others. It pertains to speech and thought dominated by the child's own internal cognitions. The child lacks the ability to reflect on operations, his or her understanding of the world tends to focus on states rather than on transformations.

First of all, Egocentrism means, amongst other things, that the child is animistic, projecting thoughts, intentions and feelings onto inanimate objects. For example:

- Clio (3.9 years old) speaking to a motor in a garage: "The motor's gone to bye-byes. It doesn't go out because of the rain."
- Nel (2.9 years old) seeing a hollow chestnut tree: "Didn't it cry when the hole was made?" To a stone: "Don't touch my garden!... My garden would cry."
- Katie (4.2 years old), while holding up a picture in such a way that she is the only one that can see it, calls out "See, Mummy how beautiful this tree is!"

It should be pointed out that this pre-operational, egocentric child is unable to comprehend points of view different from his or her own. The child is unable to recognize that a three-dimensional scene has several view points apart from his or her own. In order to investigate this phenomenon, Piaget carried out the "Mountain Study". In this "Three mountains task", Piaget would place children in front of a simple plaster mountain range and seat himself to the side. He would then proceed by asking the children to pick from four pictures the view that he, Piaget, would see. It is worth mentioning that younger children would pick the picture of the view they themselves saw while the older children picked the correct ones. Therefore, the conclusion drawn from this study is that the younger children nurtured the impression that their own view of the mountains as well as the other landmarks mentioned e.g. cross, small house, zig-zag, paths, were also the view that Piaget had.

Apart from the above, younger children tend to centre on one aspect of any problem or communication at a time. For example, they may not understand you when you tell them "Your mother is my wife." Perhaps the most famous example of the preoperational child's **centrationism** is what Piaget refers to as their inability to conserve liquid volume. For example, if a three-year old child were given some chocolate milk in a tall, skinny glass while another person were given a larger quantity but this were served in a short, fat glass, the child would tend to focus on only one of the dimensions of the glass. As the chocolate milk in the tall, skinny glass reaches a higher level than in that served in the short, thick glass, the child is likely to draw the assumption that there is more milk in the tall glass rather than the short one, even though there is far more in the latter. Actually the development of the child's ability to **decenter** marks him as having moved to the next stage, the Concrete Operations one.

Finally, Egocentrism prevents the possibility of true interaction in play which is attributed to the fact that the child is unable to take into consideration the thoughts and feelings of other children. Piaget's confirmation that children of this age, even when playing together in groups, are really playing in parallel is strongly supported by a series of observations made at the Maison des Petits de L'Institut Rousseau.

