

BOOK REVIEWS

Piaget's Theory: A Primer

John L. Phillips, Jr.

San Francisco: W.H. Freeman and Company, 1981, 192 pp., \$5.95
(paperback)

Reviewed by

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Piaget once confessed that his theory is difficult to comprehend "not only because I have written too much in the course of tackling too many different problems . . . but above all because I am not an easy author." Anyone who has attempted to summarize Piaget's monumental epistemology cannot help but smile at such understatement. How does one condense a theory that has attempted to systematize nothing less than the acquisition of human knowledge, that is spread across hundreds of books and journal articles (many of which have yet to be translated into English), that is idiosyncratically developed with little sympathy for the reader, and that is founded upon a qualitative approach foreign to our American idea of science? Moreover, when summarization is attempted in a short volume dedicated to "people who have had no training in psychology," the task becomes close to impossible. Yet such is Piaget's current popularity that many authors are inspired to take up the challenge, with very uneven results.

When compared to other introductions to Piaget's theory, Phillips' book comes off quite well. The text reads easily, covers most of Piaget's basic principles, and avoids technical interpretations. Many improvements have been made over the author's earlier effort, *The Origins of Intellect: Piaget's Theory*, although the author concedes that he has "borrowed from it freely, abbreviated the discussion of some topics, and omitted others entirely." A major innovation is the inclusion of an "Introsuammary" at the beginning which serves as both introduction and summary to the text as well as a reference source for basic Piagetian concepts. The remainder of the text follows the traditional format of one chapter devoted to each of Piaget's developmental stages.

The weakness of Phillips' book lies more with the subject matter than with the author. Piaget's theory is a tightly woven system of ideas in which one concept elaborates and enriches another. To differentiate arbitrarily between

assimilation and accommodation, for example, is to deny the fact that they comprise a unitary system making it meaningless to talk of one apart from the other or from the more general process of adaptation. An understanding of Piaget requires more than just the acquisition of a set of definitions or a summary of developmental stages; it requires a total immersion in the theory.

In summary, I recommend Phillips' book to those readers who are seeking an introductory text to Piaget's theory and who have little background in development psychology. However, I doubt that the author's hope that such readers will "emerge from the experience with a good basic comprehension of Piaget's theory" will be realized. For serious students of child development I recommend a more comprehensive account, one that takes the time to ruminate over the numerous issues Piaget has raised and to tie together various concepts. At the intermediate level the Ginsburg and Opper (1979) book or perhaps the very readable account provided by Piaget and Inhelder under the title of *The Psychology of the Child* come to mind, while for the more advanced student no better source can yet be found than Flavell's 1963 text.