



THE SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE COGNITIVE SPHERE OF THE PERSONALITY

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Ominakhon Asqarova

Third-year student, Department of Psychology,

Tashkent International University of Chemistry, Tashkent, Uzbekistan

Abstract. This article examines the social and psychological foundations of the development of the cognitive sphere of the personality, that is, of perception, attention, memory, thinking and speech. It is shown that cognitive processes are not merely the result of innate abilities or biological maturation, but are formed in the course of communication with other people, within the family and within the wider social environment in which the child grows up. The article also considers the role of adult guidance, peer collaboration, family relationships and the educational environment in cognitive development. The analysis concludes that cognitive development is a complex psychological process arising from the interaction of biological maturation and social influence, and that a rich communicative environment accelerates it while a lack of attention and stimulation may slow it down.

Keywords: cognitive development, social environment, zone of proximal development, socio-cognitive conflict, parenting, communication, socioeconomic status, scaffolding.

INTRODUCTION

The development of the cognitive sphere of the personality - that is, of perception, attention, memory, thinking and speech - remains one of the most pressing problems of contemporary psychology. These processes constitute the foundation of a person's capacity to study, to work, to solve problems and to enter into relations with others. Cognitive development was formerly explained primarily by innate ability and biological maturation (Piaget, 1952:3). Scientific research, however, demonstrates that cognitive processes are shaped through communication with other people, through joint activity



and through the cultural environment (Vygotsky, 1978:30).

The Swiss psychologist J. Piaget established that the child's intellect develops stage by stage in the process of acting actively upon the surrounding world and adapting to it (Piaget, 1952:357). The Russian psychologist L. S. Vygotsky, for his part, emphasised the decisive role of the social environment in cognitive development: in his view, the higher mental functions - for example voluntary attention, logical memory and thinking - first arise in relations between people, that is, in a social form, and only subsequently become the child's internal mental processes (Vygotsky, 1978:57). The concept of the «zone of proximal development» advanced by Vygotsky denotes the difference between what the child is able to accomplish independently and what the child is able to accomplish with the help of an adult or of a more knowledgeable peer (Vygotsky, 1978:86).

The aim of the present article is to analyse the socio-psychological conditions under which the cognitive sphere of the personality is formed, and to determine the role played in this process by communication with adults, cooperation with peers, the family environment and the conditions of instruction. The study proceeds from the position that the child's development must be examined together with the systems of relations in which the child is embedded, rather than in isolation from them (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:3).

MAIN PART

Later the American psychologists D. Wood, J. Bruner and G. Ross developed this idea in 1976 and proposed the concept of «scaffolding», which denotes the support given to the child by adults step by step and reduced as the child learns (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976:90). The Swiss social psychologists W. Doise and G. Mugny, turning their attention to cooperation among peers, elaborated the concept of socio-cognitive conflict: children who hold differing opinions on a single question are obliged to compare their own views with those of others and to reconsider them, and this gives an impetus to the development of thinking (Doise & Mugny, 1984:28).

Bringing these views together, it may be said that the child acquires knowledge not alone but in communication and cooperation with others. This proposition is also confirmed by the data concerning children who have been cut off from the social environment. According to the reports concerning the girls named Kamala and Amala, who were found in a forest in India in 1920 and were observed by the missionary J. Singh,



they had grown up without communication with human beings, and after they were found their speech, thinking and behaviour lagged considerably behind the age norm; they mastered speech very slowly and with great difficulty (Singh & Zingg, 1942:14). It should be stressed that this was not a controlled experiment but a single observed case, and that its data have been called into question by some researchers; for this reason it should be regarded not as proof but as an illustration of the effect that the absence of a social environment has upon cognitive development. Speech is of particular importance in this process, since, being at once a means of communication and an instrument of thought, it raises the child's cognitive activity to a new level. The question, therefore, is not which factor - internal or external - predominates in cognitive development, but how the two interact with one another.

The family environment and the child's immediate surroundings occupy an important place in the formation of the cognitive sphere. In 1979 the American psychologist U. Bronfenbrenner proposed an ecological model of human development and described the environment affecting the child's development as a series of systems nested within one another: the immediate environment such as the family and the school, the interrelations between them, and the broad socio-cultural setting (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:22). This model shows that the child's development depends not only upon his or her own internal potential but also upon the people with whom the child communicates directly.

Parents who communicate a great deal with the child, who answer the child's questions patiently and who set aside time for reading books and playing together create a rich environment for the development of the child's curiosity, speech and thinking (Suskind, 2015:87). Conversely, insufficient attention to the child, a scarcity of communication and the absence of a stimulating environment may cause cognitive development to slow down (Hart & Risley, 1995:180). The socioeconomic conditions of the family have likewise been found in numerous studies to be associated with the child's cognitive and linguistic development, although this association is manifested principally through the learning opportunities and the communicative environment that are created for the child within the family (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002:380).

In 1995 the American scholars B. Hart and T. Risley established that the quantity and character of communication with the child differ across families, that the number of words a child hears up to the age of three differs appreciably in families of differing



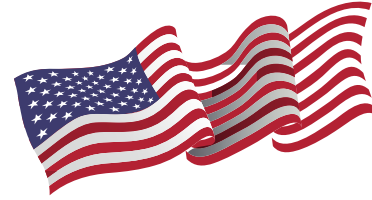
socioeconomic status, and that this difference may be related to the child's subsequent linguistic and cognitive indicators (Hart & Risley, 1995:176). D. Suskind, a physician at the University of Chicago, translated this idea into practical advice for parents, emphasising that everyday communication with the child, question and answer, and reading books together exert a favourable influence upon the development of the child's speech and thinking (Suskind, 2015:92). It must not be forgotten that what matters here is not merely the quantity of communication but also its quality and the reciprocal character of the relationship with the child.

The school and the educational environment are likewise of great significance in this process: the teacher's confidence in the child, the asking of questions that develop the child's thinking, and the use of collaborative methods of instruction consolidate the pupil's skills of independent thought (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976:98; Doise & Mugny, 1984:112). These data show that cognitive development does not consist solely in the natural aptitude of the individual, but is a process formed from childhood onward under the influence of relations with the family, the school and peers (Vygotsky, 1978:90). For this reason a supportive attitude on the part of parents and educators - one that is open to communication and that encourages independent thinking - is of decisive importance in the child's formation as an all-round developed personality in the future (Bronfenbrenner, 1979:60).

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the development of the cognitive sphere of the personality is a complex psychological process that arises as a result of the interrelation between biological maturation and the influence of the social environment. While Piaget emphasised the child's active action and Vygotsky the role of communication and the cultural environment, subsequent research has shown that the graduated assistance of adults and cooperation with peers accelerate this development appreciably (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976:97; Doise & Mugny, 1984:35). The cases of children separated from the social environment (the case of Kamala and Amala) and the studies examining the quantity and quality of communication with the child likewise demonstrate the important role of communication in cognitive development.

The family environment, communication with parents and the conditions of instruction occupy a special place in cognitive development: a rich communicative environment



develops the child's thinking and speech, whereas a lack of attention and encouragement may retard it (Bradley & Corwyn, 2002:385; Suskind, 2015:104). For this reason it is of considerable importance that parents and educators should provide assistance appropriate to the child's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978:86), should involve the child in collaborative activity and should encourage independent thinking, and that they should create a social environment supporting children's cognitive curiosity (Piaget, 1952:398; Bronfenbrenner, 1979:214).

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