

Recollections of Jean Piaget

Joan Bliss on her memories of working with the great Swiss psychologist

Oddly enough, it is strange for me to write about Piaget using his name. I knew him, as did everyone else who worked with him, exclusively as 'Patron'. For me this name stands for two aspects of Piaget, one public and one personal. First, it reflects his dominant role in the university in Geneva. Second, it reflects the fact that he chose to give me my first real chance in life, when he insisted on nominating me as a researcher even though I was then only a second-year undergraduate. Here, I want to try to sketch a candid picture of the man himself, and what it was like working with him.

The first thing to strike one about Piaget was that he was a big man – at least 6'2" tall, broad and strong. Thick white hair grew down to his shoulders, and it always seemed to stay exactly the same length. Piaget cared little about clothes, and must have had a rack full of more or less identical suits from which to choose. A grey woolly cardigan over his waistcoat, worn because he always felt the cold, completed his winter uniform. Outdoors he often added a beret, worn at a jaunty angle.

Most remarkable of all was his footwear. He invariably wore hobnailed walking boots rather than shoes, whatever the occasion. It is impossible to forget the terrible noise his boots made as he clumped loudly up to the platform to receive an award from the Ville de Geneve at a public ceremony given in his honour by the city. This was despite the best efforts of his assistants and researchers, at their meeting with him before the grand event, to persuade him just for once to wear shoes.

A meerschaum pipe, held more or less permanently between his teeth, added to

his characteristic and distinctive appearance. If he could, he would have smoked it all the time, and most discussions with him were conducted through puffs of smoke. When his doctor told him to reduce his smoking he simply halved the amount of tobacco in each fill of his pipe, converting four pipe-fulls into eight half pipe-fulls a day.

In his waistcoat pockets there permanently resided a miniature silver-handled knife used to peel and cut cloves of garlic, which he added to nearly every meal, and – most noticeably – a large fob watch on a chain. The watch was used to time every event in which he was



Joan teaching Piagetian concepts in Geneva in 1968

involved. A speaker nearing the end of the allotted time would see Piaget swinging his watch to and fro on its chain. If he or she failed to take the hint, when time ran out Piaget would interrupt and pass on to the next event, if necessary while the speaker was in mid-sentence.

When travelling, Piaget didn't believe in carrying a lot of luggage, only taking a small hand bag containing bare essentials. He often brought more back with him from his travels than he took, particularly

specimens of rare cacti to add to his extensive collection. It was said amongst his colleagues that on his regular summer holiday visits to the mountains, used by Piaget to gain solitude to write his books, he would set off looking like a peasant, with the collection of the whole year's research reports wrapped in a blanket tied to the end of a pole swung over his shoulder.

Piaget always came to work from his home in Pinchat on the outskirts of Geneva riding a very old bicycle. On one occasion Piaget is said to have been filmed appearing to take part in the tail end of the Tour de France, as it swung by him on his regular route alongside Lac Léman. On his 75th birthday, the assistants clubbed together to buy him a new bicycle. I was deputed to ride it into the room for the presentation, but it was far too big for me – I could not even reach the pedals – and I had to push it, so arriving far less spectacularly than intended. In any case, it wasn't totally clear that Piaget really appreciated a replacement for his old bike.

Always early himself, Piaget insisted on absolute punctuality in others. He rigidly imposed a start time for his lectures, either on the hour or at a quarter past. Before starting to speak, on the dot of time, he would pile up chairs against the door, so that latecomers who tried to creep in made a terrible noise. Soon everyone became very wary of being even a moment late. On one winter Monday, there had been a heavy snowfall at six in the morning. The Genevan municipality is well accustomed to dealing quickly and efficiently with snow, but it was still difficult to get to the university on time for the regular meeting Piaget held with his researchers at 8:00 every Monday morning. Piaget himself was of course punctual. He announced to the assembled group that anyone arriving late again should not expect to be re-employed in the following year – at that time, as in many European universities, the Professor, as Patron, could hire and fire staff almost at will.

When he travelled, Piaget insisted on always being early, typically arriving at the station two hours before the train was due to leave. Very early one morning I was to be seen with Piaget at Geneva station, he having phoned me around six insisting that we 'had research to discuss', but really to ensure that he got on the right train, and for company during the long wait until the train left. We made a strange pair, me in a red trouser suit with long blonde hair, Piaget in his suit and overcoat, poring over papers in the *buffet de la gare*. Checking the departure time,

Piaget found a train already waiting at the platform, and insisted on boarding it, despite a notice forbidding passengers to do so. The train promptly left the station, heading in the wrong direction. 'Joan, save me!' he cried. A porter told me that it was the right train, but that it was going off to change engines, and would be back in a while. Assured that Piaget would safely return, I slipped quietly away.

Life for Piaget revolved fundamentally around work. He had the settled habit of working hard every day, getting up around six and working until about six in the evening, although always taking a walk in the afternoon in the fields near his home. He came to the university only on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday mornings, for research meetings and lectures, and for the rest of the time worked at home.

Once, when I interviewed him at home for a newspaper series about well-known people in Geneva, he invited me into his study. It was piled high with heaps of papers and books everywhere, and furnished with just his own large chair. A small chair was brought in for me and put in a little clearing in the paper jungle. He asserted that he knew what was in every pile of paper, demonstrating this unlikely claim by blindly pulling out a sheet of paper and telling me what it was about. Was it a trick? I don't know.

His handwritten manuscripts were a remarkable sight, all written on an endless supply of the same pale yellow paper. Written in one draft, with no corrections, deletions or additions, the writing went from edge to edge of the paper, and from top to bottom, covering the entire page with no margins at all. It is worth glancing again at some pages of Piaget's books, with these facts in mind!

Piaget's Institute was set up as a kind of intensive research factory, enabling him to produce his books. Even undergraduate teaching was recruited to this goal, with students required to assist with and undertake research projects as part of their first degrees. Nominated researchers supervised this work, and contributed more of their own. Everything in the academic year was directed towards the summer, when Piaget took all the year's work to the mountains.

Piaget expected everyone else to work as hard as he did. For example, one summer I was sent to Detroit to give courses the Americans had hoped Piaget himself would give – a hopeless ambition because, as we joked amongst ourselves, he never gave a lecture anywhere unless rewarded by an addition to his collection

of honorary doctorates. Despite giving me all the work of preparing and delivering these courses on his behalf, he bombarded me throughout the summer with telegrams insisting on immediate dispatch of my research reports, for him to work on. I was left with no choice if I wanted to go on working for him.

Similarly, as a student I had, perhaps foolishly, asked Piaget which were the most important books on the immense reading list we had been given. 'All of them!' was the inevitable reply. The question was important to me because Piaget set very formidable written examinations. The rules for a paper were simple: time allowed – seven hours; maximum length of answer – four sides of paper. There

was no choice of topic – only one question being set, usually on a subject that currently preoccupied him. The seven hours allowed time to order one's thoughts, and digest and rewrite previous attempts. It also allowed time to eat lunch – usually sandwiches one brought in and submitted to inspection for covert notes. All written exams had also a viva-voce examination, which Piaget used to adjust the mark as he pleased. He had an alarming habit of closing his eyes after asking a question. This just made me talk louder, to ensure that he stayed awake. Another student, however, stopped talking, only to be reproved, 'Mademoiselle, I can think with my eyes closed, so please continue.'

Quite properly, Piaget insisted that examination answers should review alternative views to his own on any problem, even though just remembering his views was difficult enough for a student. I soon noticed how in his books, he often used the strategy of 'argument by threes'. This consisted of posing a problem, and announcing that there were three possible answers (usually empiricist, rationalist and constructivist). Arguments demolished the first two alternatives, at which point Piaget was liable to state that this left only the third possibility, thus saving himself the trouble of arguing for it in depth. The accusation is unfairly oversimplified, but I think there is some truth in it.

Piaget had the work of all those around him – researchers and students – organised to suit exactly what he wanted to achieve, which was to explore, develop and crystallise his own thinking about some epistemological problem. While the lectures reflected Piaget's current

thoughts, the regular pattern of meetings with others were his way of collecting and communally developing research ideas and interpretations. To feed this process Piaget had negotiated a remarkable arrangement with the school district. His researchers went into schools to interview and work with children from 1:30 to 3:30 every afternoon except Thursdays, being free to choose whichever children they needed. All the teachers knew and most accepted that a research team might well take children from their classes at this time. In this way, Piaget's teams of researchers had permanent ready access to ways of testing and refining research ideas thrown up by discussion in meetings with Piaget and others.

As a researcher, one was assigned schools to visit by Piaget's formidable secretary and administrator, Odette Rainger. It was unwise to complain about where one was sent, because this could easily result in next having to go to a particularly far-flung site.

Early on, lacking a car and being sent to the distant suburb of Carrouges near the French frontier, I must have looked very peculiar going by tram loaded down with armfuls of assorted bottles of coloured water, vases, beakers and other containers, pencils, paper and drawing materials.

Monday was the main meeting day. From eight until nine, Piaget and Inhelder met with all the researchers to discuss the previous week's research in schools. For this meeting, the three or four undergraduates working each day under each researcher were obliged to write up accounts of all the interviews with children, giving them to the researcher by the Friday to be absorbed over the weekend and presented at the Monday meeting. With four or five children interviewed each afternoon, as a researcher I might, when the system was working at full stretch, expect up to 20 reports a week from my undergraduates.

The Monday discussions were directed to criticising, improving and developing the ongoing research. It could take up to six months working like this to fully develop an idea or technique. In particular it often took a very long time to get the research ideas into a really simple form, so that what in the final publications look like very straightforward, even obvious things to ask children to do, had been achieved only through a long struggle.

A meeting from 9:00 to 11:00 followed immediately. This was for the Centre d'Épistémologie Génétique, to which many people came, some invited

"In the summer, Piaget took the year's research to the mountains"

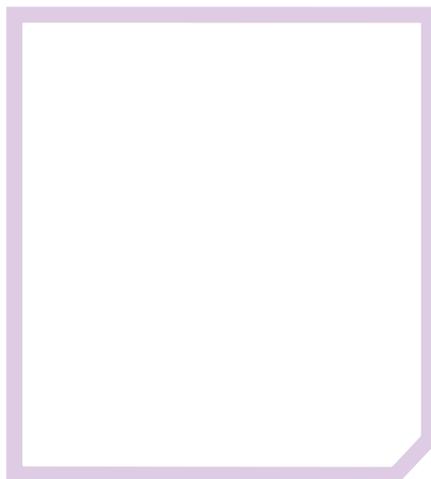
looking back

by Piaget but including other scholars who had come for a year or so to work with him. A few selected researchers also attended. Although people were from many countries, French was the only language ever allowed to be spoken. For each meeting there was always some theoretical issue raised in a paper read by someone, and an account of some relevant research or of an idea for tackling the topic through research. The idea was often to try to relate the two.

From 11:00 to 12:00 there was yet another meeting, this time of Piaget, Inhelder, some colleagues from the Centre d'Épistémologie Génétique, and some researchers, often taking a few pieces of research to discuss in greater depth, profiting from the input of residential invited scholars such as Grize, Greco or Vergnaud, and their knowledge of similar work elsewhere.

The meetings were always held in the same room, with a beautiful view overlooking Lac Léman, which could easily distract one's attention. The room had a huge, round table covered with a dark-coloured cloth, around which everyone sat, often in the same places. Lunch followed this intensive morning of meetings, when a group of about a dozen of us went off to eat the *plat du jour* at a nearby restaurant. I was cross about the fact that I always had to leave early, abandoning the group and its genial conversation, to go off into school to do yet more research. However, we often met again in the evening for Grize's logic lectures, and afterwards for a drink and sometimes supper too. In this way, a warm social dimension grew up around Piaget's highly intensive work programme, developing friendships, some of which continue to this day.

In addition to these weekly meetings, once a year Piaget organised a one-week International Seminar with between 10 and 20 outside guests, several of them very distinguished – for example Waddington, Bruner and Lunzer. In addition to theoretical papers, a number of researchers were also chosen to present their work. On one occasion when I was one of those chosen, Piaget laid a huge teasing trap for me. I had done a series of experiments with children about changes in space and volume, using a collapsible salad basket. It was thus no surprise for Piaget when I began my presentation by saying, 'Mesdames et Messieurs, je voudrais vous parler de mes expériences avec un panier à salade', and the whole room burst into gales of laughter. Piaget had guessed that I did not know that a 'panier à salade' is French slang for a Black Maria – a police wagon. No less



annoying, he never gave me the several minutes lost while everyone laughed at me! However, I quickly forgave him on this as on other occasions, because of his great sense of humour.

The university research work and that of the Centre d'Épistémologie Génétique followed a common theme for the year, chosen by Piaget – for example Mental Imagery, Memory or Causality – so giving all the activities a common purpose throughout the year. This theme might continue for only one year, but could just as well spread over two or three years. In the case of causality, the theme never really concluded. Some of us told Piaget that the results did not fit the theory, but rather than change the theory, the problem was treated as a matter of complexity of detail, so that more and more experiments – amounting to a hundred or so – were devised. In the end, Piaget did, with Garcia, reconsider the underlying theory.

Although it was Piaget who chose and announced the theme of the work to be done; within that, we researchers were free to devise our own experiments and propose our own ideas, as well as being expected to suggest our own interpretations of the results. Of course, this did not mean that we did just what we fancied – every idea was open to criticism by colleagues and by Piaget himself, through the medium of the Monday meetings.

An amusing example of his open attitude comes from a lecture in my first year of studies, in which Piaget had invited me to talk briefly about the research I had been doing. With the brashness of inexperience, I boldly started by announcing that Piaget had some ideas about mental imagery, but that I had my own too. He just smiled benignly, nodding at me to continue.

I particularly recall, from the work on memory, some examples of how research developed gradually through trial and error. In one case, we were doing a task

with children that revealed something of their cognitive level, and then going back one hour and one week later to see what they remembered, and finding out how well they then understood the task. By a sheer fluke, in the second year of this research, an assistant happened to go to the same school and select the same child for another task, and was astonished to be greeted by a fluent account of their last meeting, with the task remembered in detail. This at once changed the methodology we used, introducing a third much longer delay before going back to look at recall.

A further example is one where a child's responses led me to get very wet indeed, after following a suggestion of Piaget's. The experiment used one of the well-known liquid-pouring tasks. There were four containers: A (tall and thin), B (short and fat) and C and C' (identical conical beakers). A, B and C were all full of liquids, each a different colour. C' was empty. First liquid was poured from A into C' and back again, and then from B into C' and back. The level in C' always matched that in C.

I went back an hour later to ask children to draw pictures of what they had done, with arrows showing how the liquids had gone from one container to another. One small girl surprised me by drawing all four beakers full of liquid, and arrows joining them all. When I showed her drawing to Piaget at the next Monday meeting, he asked why I hadn't let her try the task with four full glasses, to which I could only reply rather feebly that I didn't have a fourth coloured liquid with me, not to mention being nervous about where the liquids would go. Returning a week later, she stuck to the previous story, so I asked her which liquid we poured first, whereupon she replied 'Both at the same time'. What is more, she picked up a pair of full glasses and in front of me tried with great conviction pouring each into the other. We both got drenched in coloured water. It became clear that memories depend not just on what happens but also on the understanding of what happens.

To conclude, I have to say that Piaget was very important to my career, and that I remember the years of working with him with affection and respect. He was at that time a towering figure internationally, and whatever has happened since to his reputation, the intellectual satisfaction and sheer fun of that period will never leave me.

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