The Relevance of Jean Piaget's Theory of Moral Development in Addressing The Challenges of The Society 5.0 Era

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ABSTRACT

The Society 5.0 era is characterized by the harmonious collaboration between technology and humans to create a better life. Rapid technological developments offer children access to various learning resources but simultaneously open the door to ambiguous or even contradictory moral values. This study aimed to describe the relevance of Jean Piaget's theory of moral development in addressing the challenges of the Society 5.0 era, using a literature review approach. Moral development in children begins with observing behaviors and judging them as right or wrong, followed by the imitation of those behaviors. Moral awareness begins to form in early childhood, underscoring the critical role of parents in shaping children's moral intelligence. Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, proposed a theory of moral development aligned with his broader cognitive development theory, suggesting that morality evolves through stages parallel to cognitive growth. According to Piaget, moral development occurs in two stages: (a) Heteronomous Morality (ages 5–10), where rules are seen as unchangeable mandates from authority figures such as God, parents, and teachers; and (b) Autonomous Morality or the Morality of Cooperation (ages 10 and above), where children begin to recognize differing perspectives and consider moral intentions. In today's technological age, children aged 0–8 face challenges including a lack of digital regulation, exposure to inappropriate digital content, and emotional and social disturbances. Thus, Piaget's theory remains highly relevant in navigating moral development challenges in the Society 5.0 era.

Keywords: *Jean Piaget's theory of moral development, early childhood, challenges in society 5.0 era*

1.   INTRODUCTION

The Society 5.0 era is defined by a vision in which technology and humanity collaborate to create a better quality of life. Originally introduced by the Japanese government in response to the Fourth Industrial Revolution, Society 5.0 aims to establish a human-centered society by leveraging advanced technologies. Its focus on humanity signals a new type of society that continuously innovates through the advancement of science and technology. The key characteristics of Society 5.0 include: (1) full utilization of information and communication technology (ICT), (2) a society-centered approach, (3) active public participation, (4) shared values (sustainability, inclusivity, efficiency, and intelligence), and (5) economic development (Salgues, 2018). These attributes are bringing significant changes to the education sector, particularly regarding the integration of ICT. Education in the Society 5.0 era demands high-quality human resources who are technologically literate, as technology has become an inseparable part of human life. This dynamic directly affects the role of teachers as agents of change whose responsibilities become more complex amid ongoing societal and technological transformations.

The rapid advancement of technology offers children vast learning opportunities while simultaneously exposing them to ambiguous moral messages that may conflict with foundational ethical principles. Uncontrolled digital content, social media interactions, and algorithm-driven content personalization can shape children's thinking patterns and influence their moral decision-making (Turiel, 2006). In this context, early childhood moral development is no longer influenced solely by the family and school environment but also by daily technological interactions. Understanding how children develop moral reasoning becomes increasingly vital in the digital age.

Within developmental psychology, Jean Piaget (1932) and Lawrence Kohlberg (1980) are recognized as seminal figures in explaining moral development in children. Piaget (1932) conceptualized children as "lone scientists" who construct their understanding of the world through interactions with their environment. He proposed that individuals interpret and act based on conceptual schemas developed from such interactions. Piaget (1932) identified two primary stages in moral development: heteronomous morality and autonomous morality. In the heteronomous stage, children perceive rules as fixed and immutable. This stage is marked by what Piaget (1932) described as "morality by constraint," common in early childhood.

Children growing up in the digital era often encounter cyberbullying, misinformation, and social media dependency, all of which impact their understanding of moral norms. In the Society 5.0 era, moral values are no longer solely shaped through physical interactions but also through engagements in virtual spaces, where clear social controls are often lacking. Studies show that the rapid rise of social media has led to increased social pressure on children, adversely affecting not only their mental health but also their perceptions of moral values such as justice and responsibility (Brown & Harris, 2022).

Piaget's (1932) and Kohlberg's (1980) theories offer valuable insights for addressing these challenges. Nevertheless, in the digital age, the applicability of these theories must be reexamined and adapted to the evolving socio-technological landscape. Moral education in the Society 5.0 era must account for technological influences that can either facilitate or hinder moral development in children (Smith & Johnson, 2020). Thus, revisiting the relevance of Piaget's (1932) and Kohlberg's (1980) theories is essential for creating more adaptive approaches to early childhood moral education.

Hence, this study aimed to: (a) describe Jean Piaget's (1932) theory of moral development, and (b) explore its relevance to the challenges faced by children in the Society 5.0 era. Through this exploration, Piaget's theory can be more proportionally and contextually understood and applied in educational practice. By understanding how these theories contribute to character formation in the digital age, educators can develop more effective moral education strategies that align with contemporary challenges (Narvaez, 2013).

2.   LITERATURE REVIEW AND DISCUSSION

2.1   Moral Development in Children

The term *development* refers to a series of progressive changes resulting from the processes of maturation and experience. Van den Daele (1970) defined development as "a qualitative change". This implies that development is not merely an addition of a few centimeters to a person's height or an increase in abilities, but rather a process of integrating many complex structures and functions (Hurlock, 2008, p. 2).

Santrock (1997 in Santrock, 2007) asserted that development is a pattern of movement or change that occurs throughout the human life span, beginning at conception and continuing through the entire life cycle. Thus, development encompasses all aspects of achievement and progressive abilities as a result of integration processes influenced by maturation and experience from conception onward.

Moral development refers to changes in reasoning, emotions, and behavior regarding standards of right and wrong. It includes both intrapersonal dimensions, which govern personal actions outside social interactions, and interpersonal dimensions, which regulate social interactions and conflict resolution (Santrock, 2007). According to Essa (2003), children's moral development is a long-term process of learning and internalizing rules and standards of right and wrong to develop conscience and ethical awareness.

2.2   Piaget's Stages of Moral Development

Interest in how children think about moral issues was initiated by Jean Piaget (1932), who extensively observed and interviewed children aged 4 to 12. He observed children playing marbles to understand how they used and interpreted rules in games. He also questioned them about ethical issues, such as stealing, lying, punishment, and justice. Based on these observations, he concluded that children pass through two distinct stages in their understanding of morality, as follows:

1. Heteronomous morality (ages 4–7): At this stage, children perceive justice and rules as fixed properties of the world—unchangeable and beyond human control.
2. Autonomous morality (around age 10 and older): At this stage, children begin to realize that rules and laws are created by people and can be negotiated.

Early childhood is marked by what Piaget called 'morality through constraint', in which children obey rules automatically, without evaluating them, and view authoritative adults as omnipotent. Actions are judged right or wrong based on their consequences rather than the underlying intentions.

Children aged 5-10, according to Piaget (1932), see the world through heteronomous morality. They believe that authority figures, such as parents and teachers, create absolute rules that must be obeyed without question. Rules are viewed as real and unchangeable guidelines, rather than evolving or negotiable social agreements. As children mature and their abstract thinking improves, they become less egocentric and begin to view rules more flexibly, recognizing the importance of cooperation and mutual benefit (Oswalt, 2007).

The second stage, known as moral realism, typically occurs between ages 5-9. Children in this stage begin to grasp the concept of rules but view them as external and immutable. They follow rules primarily because the rules exist, and they tend to judge actions based on consequences rather than intentions (Piaget, 2006).

The third and final stage, called moral relativism, usually begins around age seven and overlaps with the previous stage. At this point, children begin to understand that rules are not absolute and can be modified through mutual agreement. They also start to develop their own internalized moral standards, which may differ from externally imposed rules.

Piaget's theory of moral development, first published in his 1932 monograph *The Moral Judgment of the Child*, provides a foundational framework for understanding how children form moral concepts over time. Piaget (1932) identified three main stages of moral development:

- **Pre-operational moral stage (ages 2–7):** Children view morality externally and base judgments on punishment and personal comfort.
- **Concrete operational moral stage (ages 7–11):** Children begin to understand reciprocity, fairness, and the idea that rules exist for social order and can be changed through consensus.
- **Formal operational moral stage (ages 11+):** Children are capable of abstract moral reasoning and recognize that moral principles are not absolute but depend on higher ethical values.

3.   METHOD

The method used in this study was a descriptive approach through literature review. The research was based on expert opinions, theoretical perspectives, and previous studies gathered from literature sources. The research process was conducted in several stages: determining the topic, conducting a literature review by analyzing journals and articles available online, and organizing the findings systematically.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Jean Piaget's (1932) Theory of Moral Development

Etymologically, the term *moral* originates from the Latin word mos (plural: *mores*), meaning customs or habits. This Latin term is equivalent to the Greek word ethos. Generally, morality refers to a code of behavior that governs individuals in their social interactions, fostering mutual respect and dignity (Putra, 2020).

Morality is a set of values that guide individual behavior. It is often interpreted as habitual conduct reflecting virtue and decency. Hence, an individual is considered morally good when their behavior aligns with prevailing moral standards, and morally bad when it contradicts those standards (Huliyah, 2021).

Moral development refers to the process of internalizing social norms and conventions that govern human interactions. It encompasses the changes in thinking, feeling, and behavior that are aligned with moral rules and agreements in a social group (Ekaningtyas, 2022).

4.2 Jean Piaget's Theory of Moral Development

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, proposed a theory of moral development that aligns with his broader theory of cognitive development. According to Piaget, moral reasoning evolves through cognitive stages similar to intellectual development (Khasanah et al., 2023).

During adolescence, both boys and girls reach what Piaget termed the formal operational stage of cognitive development. At this stage, they are capable of considering multiple perspectives and making decisions based on hypotheses and propositions. Adolescents can approach problems from various angles, using multiple factors as a basis for reasoning (Hurlock, 1980).

Piaget and Kohlberg's cognitive moral development theories are foundational within developmental psychology and moral education. Piaget's (1932) monograph, *The Moral Judgment of the Child,* presents a systematic view of how children come to understand moral concepts. He identified the following stages of moral development :

1. Pre-operational Moral Stage (Ages 2–7):

   In this early stage, children understand morality through external consequences. They follow rules primarily out of fear of punishment or desire for reward, rather than from an internalized understanding of right and wrong.

2. Concrete Operational Moral Stage (Ages 7–11):

   At this stage, children begin to grasp the concept of mutual respect and fairness. They recognize that rules are created to maintain order and safety and that these rules can be modified through mutual agreement.

3. Formal Operational Moral Stage (Ages 11 and above):

   In this stage, children develop a more abstract and universal understanding of morality. They are able to evaluate moral principles at a deeper level and understand that moral rules are not absolute but may be based on broader ethical considerations.

4.3 Challenges of the Society 5.0 Era for Early Childhood

The Society 5.0 era is defined as a time when digital technology and artificial intelligence (AI) are integrated into human life to create a more prosperous, human-centered society (Fukuyama, 2018). In the context of early childhood development (ages 0–8), this era presents various challenges that must be carefully addressed, as follows:

   a. Increased Exposure to Digital Technology

Children in the Society 5.0 era have wide access to digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and smart TVs. Studies have shown that excessive screen time can negatively impact children's cognitive and socio-emotional development, particularly in the areas of social interaction and communication skills (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Frequent exposure to screens may lead to delays in language development and difficulties in recognizing and responding to others' emotional expressions.

b.   Lack of Control over Digital Content

One of the primary concerns for young children in this era is the difficulty in restricting their access to inappropriate digital content. Many digital platforms use algorithms that may expose children to materials that do not support positive moral development and social values (Giles, 2019). Harmful content—such as violence and unethical behavior—can be accessed easily without strict parental supervision (Strasburger et al., 2020).

c.   Disruption of Social and Emotional Development

Excessive engagement with digital media can reduce opportunities for face-to-face interaction, which is essential for developing empathy, emotional regulation, and cooperative behaviors. This disruption may hinder children's ability to build meaningful relationships and respond appropriately in social contexts.

d.   Threats to Data Security and Privacy

Children's data is often collected and stored by various online platforms, sometimes without adequate protections. This raises significant concerns regarding privacy and the potential misuse of personal information, especially when parents or educators are not fully aware of the platforms' data policies.

e.   Lack of Digital Literacy among Parents and Educators

Many parents and educators are not equipped with sufficient digital literacy to guide children effectively in using technology. Without adequate knowledge, they may struggle to filter content, set screen-time boundaries, or model responsible digital behavior, thereby increasing children's vulnerability to the negative effects of technology.

5.   CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion, several conclusions can be drawn. First, Jean Piaget's theory of moral development outlines three key stages. The pre-operational moral stage (ages 2–7) is when children see morality from an external point of view and follow rules mainly out of fear of punishment. In the concrete operational moral stage (ages 7–11), children start to understand fairness and reciprocity, and they begin to see that rules can be adjusted depending on social situations. Finally, the formal operational moral stage (age 11 and above) is marked by the ability to think about abstract moral principles, where children begin to understand that moral standards are not fixed but are shaped by broader ethical thinking.

Second, the Society 5.0 era, which builds on the technology of the Industrial 4.0 revolution to solve social problems, also brings developmental risks for young children. These risks include increased exposure to digital devices, limited control over digital content, disruptions in social and emotional growth, concerns over data security and privacy, and a lack of digital literacy among both parents and educators.

Finally, Piaget's theory of moral development remains highly relevant in facing these modern challenges in early childhood education. By applying this theory, educators and caregivers can offer age-appropriate moral support and create learning environments that encourage ethical thinking, empathy, and responsible behavior—skills that are especially important in today's digital world.

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