

The genesis of religious thought in childhood - I. A Piagetian perspective

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RESUMO: Vários pesquisadores têm destacado a importância da religiosidade em diferentes fases da vida, mas a maioria dos estudos examina somente o período adulto e mais velho. O delineamento básico de pesquisa dos autores deste ensaio aponta para os desenvolvimentos teóricos, desde um ponto de vista de Piaget, relacionando-os com as origens do pensamento religioso na criança e no adolescente. Utilizando-se do modelo de Elkind como ferramenta de compreensão do desenvolvimento da religiosidade, os autores destacam quatro diferentes níveis de capacidades cognitivas – conservação, representação, relação, compreensão (seguindo um marco conceitual piagetiano), formulando a hipótese de que cada novo nível cognitivo alcançado pela criança/adolescente, cria uma nova condição para uma resposta religiosa criativa, caso a criança esteja em contato com um ambiente espiritual-religioso coerente.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: religiosidade; origens; criança; adolescente; Piaget.

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of data on early forms of presentation of pathology, such as anxiety, schizophrenia, depression, alcoholism, criminality, etc. Today, clinician researchers are most interested in the study of early onset of diseases as a form of advancing in the control and prevention of human suffering (Rapoport, 2000). But, not only pathological phenomena are nowadays pointed as object of study in the first years of life. Developmental research on early childhood is now

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directed for a variety of aspects of young children and their families, as it is easily observed in medical and psychological literature. However, the onset of religious life remains relatively unexplored. In this presentation we will review some theoretical data on the origins of religious thought in the young child. As we will see in the following, these subjects have a wide clinical and theoretical interest for the understanding of important topics in the early development of the healthy and pathological self.

EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND EARLY NEEDS: THE ORIGINS OF CONFLICT ACCORDING TO PIAGET

Cognitive need capacities vary according to child's age. In this study we will heavily lean upon the perspective of Piaget, in contrast with the psychoanalytical (Sousa et al., 2001a) and attachment (Sousa et al., 2001b) perspectives we developed as a trilogy form of parallel essays. As is well known, Piaget "evolved a general theory of intelligence, wherein the thinking of adults derives from the gradual elaboration of mental abilities in the child. He argued that each new mental capacity carries with it the need to realize itself through action and, in the course of such mental-body action it comes into conflict with social and physical realities. The resolution of each such conflict results in structural changes that we call growth and that in turn pave the way for new conflicts and further growth in an unending dialectic" (Elkind, 1970; 1997). For better understanding the way cognitive need capacities engender conflict-problems of adaptation, the author reminds that acquisition of initial language and rudimentary comprehension of causality are implicated with the insistent "why" stage, that parents do not greatly appreciate, specially when the questions are hardly repeated. In an analogous form, at four or five years, when the child start to deal with quantitative relations, emerge a new kind of conflict with others, through the permanent concern with "who has more". . . every cognitive capacity is in itself a need that prompts behaviors that can create discord between the child and the social and physical milieu" (Elkind, 1997, p.98).

ELKIND'S PIAGETIAN MODEL OF COGNITIVE NEED CAPACITIES

Level 1—The need of conservation of the object

The discovery that objects still exist when they are no longer present to the perception of the senses is a remarkable achievement for children in the first two years of life. Piaget (1952) in *The Child's Conception of Number* stressed that the independence of immediate sensory experience is gradually organized during the second year of life. This acquisition is obviously important because the internal permanence

of the objects is an indispensable prerequisite for all mental later activity. "An infant . . . who is smiling delightedly at an adult peering from the side of the crib, will turn away immediately if the adult ducks out of sight. The infant does not cry but behaves as if the adult drops out of existence" (Elkind, 1997, p. 99). It is interesting to realize that children firstly understand that objects are transient and only later they are permanent. In contrast, years later, children are able to realize that themselves and their loved ones must ultimately die. It is shocking to assume that life is everlasting and transient. The *search for internal conservation of the object* may, in many cases, not attain full impact until adolescence, but there is evidence that it starts in the early childhood. A ready solution for this anxious conflict lies in the concept of God, as the ultimate conservation, "transcending the bounds of space, time, and corporeality" (Elkind, 1997, p.100). Accepting the concept of God the young person can deal (at least partially) with the human problem of the permanence of the object.

Level 2–The search for representation

The preschool period presents (the same as during infancy) rapid and wide-ranging mental growth and intellectual accomplishments. The acquisition and mastery of language is a foremost topic among others. Children now go far beyond the mere representation (and *conservation*) of things by mental images. The reader will remind that language can be understood as a series of conventional signs "that bear no physical resemblance to that which they represent" (Elkind, 1997, p.100). The child enters in the symbolic world with an extraordinary progress of his brain-mental organization. At this level the child can mentally transform any object into another, creating playthings, playing adults behavior, house and school. This is a new cognitive capacity and a new need for *representation* that continues throughout life.

"Like the search for conservation, the search for representation . . . [is directed to] . . . the contents of thought and those of the physical and social environment. *As personal knowledge of the self and world grows more exact, more exacting forms of representation are sought.* Not only does vocabulary increase at an extraordinary rate, but, there is the initial acquisition of new tools of representation, such as mathematics and the graphic arts. *Yet, the more exacting the child becomes in this search for representation, the more dissatisfying the results seem to be*". . . the maturing child gradually realizes that language is a lumbering means at best for conveying thoughts and is hopelessly inadequate for expressing feelings" (Elkind, 1997, p.101) (italics added). These aspects configure conflicts at Level 2. We expect that it is clear that conflicts are not restricted to the relationships with significant others. If the young person has accepted the representation of God "and nothing else, one would be at a loss to represent the transcendent" (Elkind, 1997, p.101). As you would remember, at this stage it is difficult to signify what is not spatial,

temporal or corporeal. Then, an isolated image of God constructed in this level poses special problems. Only if religion affords more than a God concept, such as others representations of the transcendent (totems and idols for primitive religions, and the Scripture for “revealed” religions – Catholicism among others) it would be understandable for the child the outcome of his search for representation both in concrete and abstract world.

Level 3–The search for relations

Around the sixth year, the “age of reason”, the child has a comparable mind with the adult mind. He she is now able to make logical deductions, e.g., “to recognize that if A is greater than B and if B is greater than C, then A must be greater than C, even if A and C are not directly compared” (Elkind 1961, p.101). They are able too to nest classes, e.g., “to recognize that, say, boys+girls=children, and children–boys=girls, and so forth” (Elkind, 1964). To reason logically mean that children are now able to relate world phenomena and to conceptualize time and space in a broadened way. Although this new capacity opens the opportunity for pleasant discoveries, it forces sometimes the child to disheartening situations. “There is often no simple logical answer to the question ‘why did this happen to me’” (Elkind, 1997, p.102), and this is a traumatic question for all ages. There is progress in general understanding of the world, but there is too the trauma of how much one cannot know. It is the revelation of the ignorance.

From a religious perspective a new challenge is now present (considering the previous acceptance of the concept of God and its scriptural representation): the question of the self in relation to the transcendent. In this level religion “affords a means whereby the individual can relate to the deity, for it offers the sacrament of worship” (Elkind, 1997, p.102). The idea is that the participation in worship offers the young person the possibility of association with the transcendent in a personal way. Long et al. (1967) referred that many young people are not interested in formal worship, but are prone to engage in personal or individual worship. Summarizing, for the adolescent “who has accepted God and his scriptural representation, the question of relating to God is an inevitable one, no matter how it is resolved” (Elkind, 1997, p.102).

Level 4–The search for comprehension

Intelligence transformations undergone momentous changes during adolescence, in an analogous proportion to physical and mental changes. One of the most important capacities achieved is the condition for introspection, i.e., treating thoughts and feelings as external objects and being able to reason about them. In a parallel form, other capacities are developed, such as to construct ideals, to manage utopic thoughts, ideal mates, and in problem-solving situations, to use complex and

systematic analysis of a large series of factors involved (Inhelder and Piaget, 1968). The general assumption that undergirds this series of ideas is the new capacity for constructing theories. The corresponding need is the search for comprehension that is perdurable throughout life like all other capacities referred above. "The search for comprehension, like the other capacities, never meets with complete success. Whether it be in the field of science, art, history, or government, each new effort uncovers new puzzles for the understanding. The same holds true on the personal plane. To illustrate, although the adolescent now has a conception of personality that enables an understanding of people in depth, human foibles and eccentricities are still encountered that defy generalizations. And, though this newfound capacity for comprehension enables self-scrutiny, even here there is frequent failure" (Elkind, 1997, p.103).

The religious solution to the problem of comprehension arises in a natural way for those young people who have accepted God, his scriptural representation and the sacrament of worship. But, many adolescents often seek such comprehension on their own, frequently resulting in disheartening. In the religious domain, the body of myth, legend, and history provides comprehension to the existence of God.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Research focusing on religion and development or mental health in children or adolescents is an almost virgin field (Benson et al., 1997; Koenig, 1998). To thoughtful understanding and managing religious, developmental and psychic issues in particular phases of life authors agree with the necessity of developing specialties, e.g., pediatrics and geriatrics, related with those issues (Koenig, 1998). Our contribution in this triple issued essays (Sousa et al, 2001b; Sousa et al., 2001c) is focused in this direction, stressing the need for managing different theoretical and conceptual frames.

Elkind's scheme summarized above illustrates "the extraordinary fit between certain basic cognitive need capacities and the major elements of institutional religion" (Elkind, 1997, p.104). Following Piaget's developmental concepts the referred author points the probability that this fit is not accidental, and that religion, at least partially, "evolved to provide solutions to the problems of adaptation posed by these needed [evolutionary] capacities [as postulated by Piaget]" (Elkind, 1997, p.104). These set of assumptions permits to speak of the genesis of religious thought in the child.

There is certain agreement that there are no mental elements (such as drives, emotions, defenses) uniquely religious, but, it seems that any psychic element is able to be influenced by religious thought when associated with religious experiences. This is why Elkind's Piagetian model defends the existence of uniquely religious developmental

adaptations, understood the adaptations as a product of interaction between subject and society. Nature and nurture are both participants in adaptations, and the same appears to be true for religious adaptations.

“The concept of God, or more generally, of the transcendent, cannot be reduced to the search for conservation [*Level 1*] any more than it can be traced to the phenomenon of death. Contrariwise, neither the search for conservation nor the phenomenon of death is in itself religious, although it may well take part in the production of religious elements. Like a gestalt, such as a painting or a melody, the transcendent is greater than the sum or product of its parts” (Elkind, 1997, p.104). If the concept of God (or Spirit) is accepted as the ultimate conservation (of the object), then the child and the adolescent are prone to successive adaptations, according to the developmental need capacities (*Levels 2 to 4*). The ready-made constructs afforded by scripture, worship and theology are leading elements in the acquisition of developmental religiousness during childhood, and they are probably able to support the child in his/her critical developmental periods.

ABSTRACT: The importance of religiosity in different phases of life have been pointed out by several researchers, but most studies covers adult and older periods only. In this presentation, the authors’ basic research design is to develop theoretical concepts from a Piagetian point of view, regarding the origins of religious thought in the child and the adolescent. Using Elkind’s model as a tool for the understanding of religiousness development, authors pointed four different levels of cognitive need capacities – conservation, representation, relation and comprehension (following Piaget’s framework), hypothesizing that every new level that is reached by the developing child/adolescent creates a new condition for creative religious response if the child is in contact with a coherent spiritual-religious environment.

KEY WORDS: religiosity; origins; child; adolescent; Piaget.

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