

Egocentrism

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Building upon Sigmund Freud's concept of *ego*, defined as the "I" component of an individual and the mediator between oneself and the external world, Jean Piaget developed the concept of egocentrism. Thus, egocentrism refers to an inward-looking cognitive phenomenon defined as having or regarding the self as the center of all things.

Piaget originally believed egocentrism to be associated with preschool aged children, arguing that an increased cognitive capacity for abstract thinking was necessary to take another's perspective. For example, imagine a three-year-old who believes that she is invisible as soon as she places her hands over her face. Because the child cannot see anything from her viewpoint, her egocentrism causes her to believe that no one else can see her as well. Piaget studied egocentrism in children through a creative paradigm known as the "Three Mountain Problem". In this test the child examines three mountains all with something different at the top of the mountain. The child sits at one side of the mountains and then a doll is placed at another side. Then the child is asked to draw the mountains from the doll's perspective. According to Piaget, because they are unable to see things from another point of view, young children will draw the mountain from their own perspective and claim that is what the doll sees as well.

Although Piaget originally confined egocentrism to early childhood, subsequent scholars have demonstrated the presence of this phenomenon at later periods of the lifespan. For example,

according to David Elkind, egocentrism manifests itself in adolescence in the form of the (1) imaginary audience and (2) personal fable.

In the phenomenon of the imaginary audience, the adolescent falsely believes that others are paying a considerable amount of attention to oneself. For example, perhaps an adolescent boy is particularly troubled about his changing voice. He feels that everyone is watching and listening to him as his voice cracks during class. Similarly, imagine a teenage girl who, as she gains weight during puberty, constantly worries about how her clothes now fit. In short, because of the egocentric aspects of adolescent cognition, these adolescents believe themselves to always be the center of the action, always the focus of everyone's attention.

Similarly, the concept of the personal fable refers to the notion that one believes that one's situation, good or bad, is unique. For example, an adolescent experiencing a breakup may feel as though no one has ever felt as poorly as they do or that no one has ever had a break up as bad as theirs. Perhaps a teen recognizes the dangers of texting while driving, but fails to believe that anything bad would happen to *him*. Such thoughts are a direct result of the adolescent being egocentric in a manner Piaget originally proposed was confined to early childhood.

The mindset that accompanies the personal fable and the imaginary audience has both benefits and consequences. For the young child, a benefit to egocentrism can lead to the development of the theory of mind. Egocentrism allows for the child to first learn their own thoughts, feelings, and desires. As their mental capacity develops, the developing theory of mind enables the child to understand these same concepts but from the perspective of others.

The benefits of egocentric thinking also manifest in adolescence. In particular, a driving force behind psychosocial development in adolescence is the search for identity. Adolescents begin to look into the future and consider careers, relationships, and other possibilities. In the

process, adolescents begin to develop components of their identities. In order to develop their identities, it is essential that adolescents take an inward look at themselves.

Despite these benefits, the inward thinking that occurs as a result of egocentrism can lead to certain consequences. For example, the low self-esteem that accompanies egocentric thinking is a result of adolescents feeling that everything they do, especially the bad, is noticed. Similarly, the phenomenon of optimistic bias occurs when individuals underestimate their chances of experiencing negative events. For example an adolescent who smokes cigarettes may know that smoking causes cancer but believes that it will not happen to *them*.

Egocentrism makes it difficult to take the perspective of another individual, which has a number of implications for psychosocial development. Although egocentrism has historically been studied as a phenomenon specific to early childhood and, more recently, adolescence, more contemporary research has identified the phenomenon as being present throughout the lifespan.

Further Readings

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