
Everyday Cognition:
Its Development in Social Context

Edited by
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To our children: *Rebecca Lave*
Luisa, Valerie, and David Magarian

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Introduction: Thinking and Learning in Social Context

Barbara Rogoff

Cognitive developmental work has been overly concerned with describing mental changes which are assumed to occur within the individual independent of contextual influences. The predominant focus has been on establishing stages of development or transformations in capabilities associated with development. Most depictions of stages (e.g. the concrete operational stage of Piaget) or capacities (e.g. spatial skill, metamemorial ability) assume that the stage or capacity characterizes the person's thinking across a large number of task situations (Piaget, 1970; Feldman, 1980; Fischer, 1980). Usually the existence of the stage or capacity is evaluated through the use of one or a small sample of task situations that are assumed to represent the domain of problems which people meet. However, when multiple tasks are given, the assumption of widespread generality of stage or capacity is usually not upheld (Reese, 1977; Brainerd, 1978; Feldman, 1980; Fischer, 1980; Siegler, 1981). Cognitive skills which are logically similar or isomorphic (e.g. conservation, problem solving, role taking) often appear at different ages or do not cluster together on similar tasks performed by the same individuals. Instead, cognitive skills seem to fluctuate as a function of the situation, which suggests that skills are limited in their generality.

Increasingly, psychologists emphasize the role of context in cognitive activities (Siegel, 1977; Cole, Hood & McDermott, 1978a; Gelman, 1978; Rogoff, 1982). Concern with contextual variation in skills has been influenced by cross-cultural observations that people who have difficulty with a task embodying a particular skill in the laboratory spontaneously evidence the skill in their everyday activities (Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, 1979;

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