

Thinking spaces embedded in practices and respectful social interactions as sources of development

Acceptance speech for The Distinguished Contributions to Developmental Science Award of the *Jean Piaget Society*. Belgrade, May 31st, 2025.

Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont (*)
University of Neuchâtel (Switzerland)
anne-nelly.perret-clermont@unine.ch
<https://perret-clermont.com/>

Dear President of the Jean Piaget Society, dear Stuart,
Dear Chair of the Awards Committee, dear Brian,
Dear Friends from the Jean Piaget Society,
Dear Colleagues,

Thank you all so much. I feel so deeply honored. I am overwhelmed by emotion...

Last January, when I received a message from Stuart telling me about this award, I was so surprised that it took me awhile to understand what was happening. I couldn't even tell my husband! In fact, I thought that I had misunderstood the message. To say it in Piagetian terms: my mind could not "assimilate" the news. I was in shock. No "assimilation" at all! Then, slowly, I realized that Stuart was talking about an incredible honor conferred on me by the great Jean Piaget Society and its dear colleagues and friends. I still can't believe it. You must have made a mistake! But I accept with gratitude because it is the perfect occasion to reiterate my thanks to all those I have worked with or met in my scientific and academic life, starting with my husband, Jean-François, who has shared most of my scientific excursions. He is also a psychologist and an academic, and probably my main provider of very kind "socio-cognitive conflicts"!

The joy that I have experienced in collective scientific adventures has rendered me very grateful to all those who were a part of them. I was very fortunate to have wonderful students, and so many nice colleagues all over the world. Quite a few of these colleagues are members of the Jean Piaget Society and are here today. To all of you, I wish to extend all my thanks.

I will share now with you some reflections on my trajectory as a researcher. I started studying child development and getting involved in youth work in Switzerland and England. I received training in vocational guidance, education (including adult education), and social psychology. I have enjoyed discovering all these perspectives as well as undertaking research projects at the University of Geneva.

Following this I was lucky to be hired by the University of Neuchâtel, where Piaget had his first professorship. There, Jean-Blaise Grize was very active, also Pierre Centlivres, who ran a dynamic department of anthropology with extensive contacts; and there was a creative department of linguistics. For several years, I was the only female professor. It was a very small institution and couldn't offer much support, but, in counterpart – and for me this was fundamental – that left me with total freedom to define my own areas of interest and the content of my teaching. I also felt free to take initiatives to promote interdisciplinary teaching and cooperation.

I am grateful to the Swiss National Research Foundation, which has supported my work from the start, even when my approaches were not quite standard.

I was concerned about my students' possibilities to find jobs after their studies; this was one of the reasons I had to reach beyond academia for contacts and collaborations.

Within the university, I was involved in reforming the training of speech therapists and in contributing to teacher education. It was a rich array of activities, very demanding, but I also enjoyed dealing with issues related to professional practices.

I slowly found my way through different avenues of thought and reflected on their common grounds. Then a new generation of brilliant former doctoral students, who had gained international reputations for their innovative work in different universities, gave birth in Switzerland to a line of research in historical-sociocultural psychology of life-long development. I am very happy to be part of this network, which has also attracted an array of dynamic colleagues from abroad with fascinating initiatives in different fields. Some are here today. I will not name them, because it would require a large genealogical tree with ancestors, cousins, and partners.

This academic context allowed me to become involved in different fields, one leading to another, sometimes via hidden shaded paths, or after a long-awaited-for opportunity. In my doctoral dissertation and first book on cognitive social interactions in children, I had tried to articulate the quantitative experimental approach of my supervisor, Willem Doise, a social psychologist, with the very qualitative approach of Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder. In those days it was a risky mix, with the potential for deep misunderstandings and some attacks. Fortunately, they were overcome thanks to Doise and Inhelder's openness. Within this social - let's call it "dialectic" – context, and to my great disappointment, nobody really noticed that I had also tentatively (very tentatively!) tried to introduce a sociological perspective to the analysis of my data, which opened, at least for me, new questions. Questions that led me to examine, at a micro-level, the so-called "causality" of school failure.

Thereby, I found myself studying adult-child communication and, in particular, the role of cognitive expectations and interpretative processes on both sides, adult and child. This necessitated a very close look at what, in fact, these interactants (teachers, parents, students, kids) were really talking about. Often it was not what was formally expected! It is fascinating to consider each participant's perspective and to discover the micro-negotiations that permit (or not) the establishment of some intersubjectivity and progress in the construction of shared understandings. It is possible to see how thinking is entwined in affective moves and identity quests, within material and symbolic transactions. In discussions we have shared for more than 40 years, Antonio Iannaccone has clarified, each time more precisely, how active children are in exploring the settings in which adults put them. Children have a sort of urgent need to make sense of the situation and its demands, before indulging in an effort to participate or responding to the adult. My theoretical question became then: what kind of "thinking space" - i.e., what kind of material, cognitive, social and emotional space - do we offer children in schools, students in our universities, apprentices in training worksites? Are they really propitious for *thinking*? And what about therapeutical settings? For instance, in psychotherapy, what are the conditions that allow for very painful forgotten memories to emerge and become matter for thinking and new interpretations? Unfortunately, I don't have the time to take you on an odyssey of the very different areas that I have investigated with such questions: schooling of migrant children, understanding and teaching mathematics, adoption of digitalized procedures, distance education, cultural clashes, and presently I am back studying children's reasoning in argumentative dialogues and in philosophical workshops.

All this work has deepened my belief in the importance of ***respectful social interactions*** for the development of the person. It has equipped me with a theoretical basis to better observe the processes at work. It helps me understand what they mean and the practical implications. It seems that many citizens, as well as professional researchers, are ready to accept this statement about the importance of respectful social interactions but we are often unaware that very often only lip service is paid to this statement. Why so?

For example, with Marcelo Giglio, we have worked with voluntary teachers who wished to better understand how children can work in groups in their classrooms. They seemed convinced by the pedagogical design that they had adopted and adapted to observe group work. Nevertheless, watching the videos with us, the teachers were very surprised to note that very often they couldn't manage to keep silent for more than 3 minutes without interfering with the on-going activity of the children that they meant to only observe! Why? "I felt the need to help them" was their common response. And we asked: "Why? What is at stake? If children deviate from your expectations for a few minutes, what is

at risk?" The teachers' intention was to help their students. We then asked: "Are you sure that in this or that precise case your intervention really helped ? Isn't it at the cost of disturbing the children's own strategies or explorations?"

Respectful social interactions are not trivial! They are difficult to enact if, by "respectful", we mean a sincere consideration of the uniqueness of the interlocutor and of his or her agentivity. This respect has to be cultivated. *Respectful* social interactions are invitations to communicate, think, and care, and not to just act; they allow for the development of awareness, wonder, and enjoyment. They create a context in which decentration is possible, an interpersonal safe context likely to become a "*thinking space*". In the present historical period, we have a great need to think - not just to learn but also to *think*. There is a real urgency to figure out how we can contribute to peace building and to a safe, enjoyable and long-lasting life environment for all. And this requires not only learning but also thinking!

Henri Bergson, a philosopher who deeply impressed Piaget, used to call attention to the creative processes at work everywhere in nature. Respectful observation of this creativity brings us a lot to reflect upon. One way or another, the world is inventing itself at every step. Humans are part of this world adventure. But before wanting to master nature, before desiring to teach children or to change others, I understand Bergson and Piaget as authors of an invitation to first observe what is already at work. It is a precondition to become capable of observing afterwards the consequences of our actions. This leads to an ethical question: what are our roles and responsibilities in this life adventure? What are the impacts of our actions and theories in this world that is (to follow Bergson's perspective) inventing itself? In particular, what are the impacts of our research and do we acknowledge this impact when we present our results? Besides, we are never just standing there, immobile, as if the world could be observed from a supposedly neutral observation point, from a balcony out of space and out of time. I have the feeling that every day I understand better that researchers are *in* the world, constantly interacting with it in complex interdependencies, co-creating the conditions of their observations and the frames of their interpretations.

Nearly a century ago, during the so-called "crisis of indeterminacy", nuclear physicists became conscious of their total dependency on the tools they use to make observations: the events that they observe are not just "out there" but they are co-created by their interventions. Bruno Latour has illustrated this in many ways. But has developmental psychology sufficiently understood that, on this matter, it faces the same types of problems as physicists do? We study our fellow humans, and their children, through the lenses of our own language, norms, social representations, expectations, goals and hopes, blind to our prejudices and to the many consequences of our gestures, words and positions.

We are often imbedded in asymmetrical relationships of power; hence we are unfortunately not really obliged to listen to our interlocutors' intents, meanings and stakes when they accept to contribute to the "data" that we are collecting (or more exactly: the data we are co-creating). By the way, I think we need to revisit the term "data".

It is so important, as human beings and as researchers, to have **secure thinking spaces**, and to be able to share our questions with others. This is what happened to me during the last 3 years, thanks to the Jean Piaget Society, which offered me the framework to think deeply about some of the above-mentioned issues. Thanks to JPS, I met Nancy Budwig, as did Aleksandar Baucal, and we discovered that we had very similar concerns in spite of our different scientific backgrounds and our responsibilities in quite different contexts. We have shared papers and past and present experiences; we have discussed hot issues, and finally we decided to write a proposal for this congress, which is really a treat for us! Thanks to those who have made JPS such an important, lively and open community in which we can share not only results but also concerns and hopes. For me, personally, this joint enterprise with Nancy and Sash has been enjoyable at every step: a real long lasting, intense and in-depth "peer interaction". And discussing these issues now with all of you at this conference adds still a whole other dimension!

I have other fond memories of JPS that I will talk about later on. It is a precious organization and it deserves attention and care as such. I wonder if we are always conscious enough of the importance of organizations. I have always been convinced that organizing encounters and meetings, founding proper scientific societies and journals, and contributing to scientific policy were part of the job of doing research. Adequate institutional settings are needed to explore new ideas, methodologies, disciplinary and inter-professional cooperations, and to share the results with all those concerned. I have been a member of the Swiss Advisory Council for Science, of the board of the Swiss National Research Foundation, of the councils of two different universities, and I came to realize not only how many constraints operate in the institutions that frame our work, but also that it is possible to overcome some of the shortcomings imposed by the institutional constraints if proper choices are made by active members allying to build new solutions. In Piagetian terms, researchers are invited to *assimilate* on-going social and institutional practices but also to *accommodate* them!

At a certain point, when I was very concerned about the difficult dialogue between practitioners and researchers, I saw an opportunity to take a political initiative, with several colleagues and friends, to create a federal fund (named DORE – Do Research) dedicated to applied research in the professional field. I then had the chance to chair the DORE fund, with efficient board members, assisted by Alaric

Kohler (here today). Usually, in Switzerland (and often elsewhere too), applied research is seen as top-down "application" of existing knowledge: those who believe they have the knowledge (they usually belong to universities) engage in efforts to share it (top-down) with so-called "practitioners". DORE has introduced a different paradigm: it offers financial support only if the project can demonstrate that it has been conceived *cooperatively by experts in the field and scientists*, and only if both sides also gain material support from their own institutions. It is a fascinating experience to observe how, in DORE, new questions are raised not only by scientists but also by professionals happy for the opportunity to transform their problems into objects of study, and to devise solutions to be tried out. It is interesting to see how much talk and sharing of experience and of knowledge is carried out *before* the project even starts; and to see that, when it does start, it is co-owned by all the participants. Because they have gained some common understanding of what is expected from the research before starting, practitioners, researchers and institution leaders can now build on it to discuss advancements as the research progresses. By the end, the usual problems of the "transfer" of results from the "experts" to the "users" are absent because knowledge has been co-constructed along the way, within relevant exchanges of information and experience.

A lesson I learned during my DORE adventure is how precious institutions are! We have to care for them and help keep them from falling into conservatism and bureaucracy. Hence, let me turn back to the Jean Piaget Society as a living institution that we care for. I would like to tell you about two other vivid memories I have. They are in line with my research results, and with the title of this talk: "Thinking spaces embedded in practices and respectful social interactions as sources of development".

The first memory is as an excellent example of how a few respectful interactions can have strong impacts. At some point, the doctoral students of the Institute of psychology and education at Neuchâtel were feeling confused and discouraged: they had attended scientific meetings in which they had presented their research. They were deeply disappointed. Listening to their comments, I heard:

- *It is no fun. The game seems to be to demolish other people's research with nasty criticism. Or to preach for only one kind of approach supposed to be "the best".*
- *The climate is so competitive! Attendants seem to have no interest in research topics other than their own.*
- *The expectations for quantitative results override everything, leaving insufficient space to discuss even what is it that you count.*
- *Only those with high status are listened to.*
- *I was so scared. I couldn't even hear the comments that I received.*

- *I just don't want to be part of this. I don't believe that science requires it.*
- *I know that I have to present papers at conferences. So, I do, but then I leave the conference as soon as possible.*

The worst comment came from one of our most brilliant students, even though she was used to working in a male environment, since she had paid for her studies with a part-time job at a technical school. She stamped her foot:

- *I will never go to a meeting again in such a misogynous competitive atmosphere! What sense does it make?*

It was a mess. Fortunately, a few months later, two doctoral students came back with an opposite experience. Their English was chaotic. They had had to struggle to find financial support to engage in what seemed to be a very long journey for European students. They were quite anxious before going. But they came back enthusiastic. They had attended a conference of the Jean Piaget Society! In our research seminar, they told us in detail how welcomed they felt and how much they enjoyed the meeting. They were thrilled by the discussions. They described the kind attention they had received from senior scientists who had spent lots of time with them discussing their research and interests. Emphasis was not on the limits of their juvenile contributions but on the questions their work raises, the avenues for possible future research. They could even - they said - express their doubts and receive suggestions! Informal moments were just as important as formal moments for productive thinking and information. They added: "We were not always sharing the same epistemological premises, but we could talk".

Many thanks to JPS for this experience, which was a seminal experience for these young travelers but also for our other doctoral students. At the Institute, we discussed these issues at length, and thereafter it became clear that we would resist some kind of academic pressures when choosing which conferences to attend, acknowledging that a respectful climate of intellectual exchange conducive to critical discussions and creativity, as well as the sharing of information, were the most important criteria. This was in line with our own ongoing theorization of the conditions for social interactions to enhance cognitive growth! We started giving explicit priority to joining like-minded colleagues. For instance, Clotilde Pontecorvo, who just could not imagine how any research would be successful without pleasure as a fundamental motive.

Indeed, if we are not very careful, the present-day bureaucratic pressures for credits on one's CV, for a lot of publications, and for conformity to the discipline mainstream risk impeding serious scientific advances. Let's just try to imagine Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky as students today. What would they

do to survive and become who they were? You'll tell me perhaps that... it depends in which context! Yes, precisely, let's revisit this question, paying critical attention to the bureaucratic dimensions of the context.

Both young and advanced researchers can benefit from social support and creative actions. This brings me to another memory. It concerns Piaget, who was then 70 years old. It is such a powerful memory for me that I tell it a lot (sorry if you have already heard this!). In those days in Geneva, there were a lot of discussions on learning. Jean Piaget had been concerned for decades with backing up theoretically and empirically the distinction between "surface" learning ("*l'apprentissage au sens restreint*") and "deep" learning ("*l'apprentissage au sens large*"). His initial move probably came from the impulses he received from his own masters (Edouard Claparède, Pierre Bovet and his father, Arthur Piaget, a pioneering historian); but also from his own experience of progressive education in the youth movement "Friends of Nature". Other impulses were the call he received in Geneva to help provide scientific basis to emergent Progressive Education (in line with Dewey, Decroly, and others); and from his work as first director of the International Bureau of Education. But now, reaching the end of his career, I think that Piaget was really sorry not to feel better understood on the matter of "deep learning" both by the local schools and by his international English-speaking colleagues, and this in spite of Jerome Bruner's and others' obvious efforts to reach him.

In those days, as students in Geneva, we often heard a sort of lamentation: "Americans don't understand us". But, at times, we also had the feeling that Piaget and many of his colleagues (with exceptions such as Bärbel Inhelder) wanted to keep away from some of the Anglo-Saxon debates in developmental psychology - at least it seemed that way to our naïve minds! We considered it a quasi-sectarian attitude. Hence, you can imagine our surprise when (in May 1969?) Piaget entered the main lecture room of the University of Geneva to teach his course, incredibly excited, walking down the aisle of this large auditorium ostentatiously waving a letter. Then, after having climbed onto the stage, he declared: "Dear students, you who often criticize me... yet can you imagine that I have received a letter from Americans who want to found an important scientific society to promote research on development and knowledge, and in this letter, they are asking me permission to name it: "The Jean Piaget Society"?!!! It was our turn to be very impressed by this letter, and we were just as impressed to see the emotion it was creating in Piaget himself. It was not the first time he had received a very important honor - why was it so important to him? And how could it come from a context, the United States, in which (that's what we had so often been told) researchers did not understand his scientific approach? What could this mean?

We were indeed witnessing an important turning point! With this decision, the pioneering team of the Jean Piaget Society was opening a new future for important international dialogues in spite of different philosophical traditions and linguistic barriers. This was especially true in North and South America and in Europe, Australia, Japan...

The present JPS 2025 meeting has moved further East in Europe and marks a new step in this process. In particular, this year, we are very happy to welcome Professor Pang Weiguo from China, co-founder and director of the Jean Piaget Research Center in Shanghai. He and his colleagues are the first to have collected and published a complete edition of all the works of Piaget, now available in Chinese.

Some researchers from Africa would also have liked to participate. Unfortunately, they could not find proper funding. I suppose that they will in the future. They will continue to enlarge our possibilities for joint cognitive growth and knowledge development. This is, in itself, an important contribution to peace and sustainability.

Thank you for your attention. Thank you all again for this incredible honor.

() Acknowledgment: I would like to extend my thanks to Athena Sargent for her language revision and for her perseverance in helping me, all along the way, to express myself in English.*