

SECONDARY CIRCULAR REACTION

Authored by
Mohammed loot

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Theoretical Foundations of Secondary Circular Reactions

The concept of the **secondary circular reaction** serves as a cornerstone in the study of early childhood development, specifically within the domain of cognitive psychology. This phenomenon represents a pivotal shift in an infant's interaction with the world, marking the transition from self-focused behaviors to environment-focused explorations. In the broader context of developmental science, these reactions are understood as repetitive actions that a child performs to reproduce an interesting or pleasing effect that first occurred by chance. Unlike earlier developmental stages where the infant is primarily concerned with their own bodily sensations, the emergence of **secondary circular reactions** signifies the beginning of a truly interactive relationship with the external environment. This stage is crucial because it indicates that the infant is no longer merely a passive recipient of sensory information but is becoming an active agent capable of intentionality and environmental manipulation.

Jean Piaget, the Swiss psychologist renowned for his theory of cognitive development, was the first to systematically categorize these behaviors within the **sensorimotor stage**. He observed that during the third substage of sensorimotor development--typically occurring between four and eight months of age--infants begin to show a marked interest in the consequences of their actions on objects. This period is characterized by the infant's increasing ability to coordinate visual and tactile information, allowing them to reach for, grasp, and manipulate items in their vicinity. The term "circular" is used because the behavior is repetitive; once a child discovers that a specific action produces a desirable outcome, they will perform that action again and again to sustain the experience. The "secondary" nature of the reaction distinguishes it from "primary" reactions, which are centered on the infant's own body, such as thumb-sucking or repetitive vocalizations.

To understand the profound nature of this developmental leap, one must consider the **intentionality** that begins to bloom during this phase. While the initial discovery of an external effect might be accidental--such as a foot inadvertently striking a hanging mobile--the subsequent repetition of that action is a deliberate attempt to recreate the sensory feedback. This intentional repetition is the earliest form of **goal-directed behavior**, laying the groundwork for more complex problem-solving skills that will emerge later in childhood. By focusing on the external world, the infant begins to construct a rudimentary understanding of cause and effect, which is essential for all future learning and cognitive maturation. This transition is not merely a change in behavior but a fundamental restructuring of the infant's mental processes as they begin to differentiate themselves from the objects around them.

The Piagetian Substage Framework and Sensorimotor Growth

Within the **sensorimotor stage** of development, Piaget identified six distinct substages, with the third substage being the period where **secondary circular reactions** become the primary mode of

learning. During this time, the infant's motor skills have advanced sufficiently to allow for more complex interactions with the environment. They are no longer limited to basic reflexes or simple habits; instead, they are developing **schemata**--organized patterns of thought or behavior--that involve the manipulation of external objects. This substage is a bridge between the purely physical sensations of the neonate and the more symbolic, mental representations that define later childhood. The infant's focus shifts from the "me" to the "not-me," which is a significant milestone in the development of **object permanence** and spatial awareness.

The progression into the stage of **secondary circular reactions** is facilitated by the maturation of the nervous system and the infant's increasing physical strength and coordination. For instance, as infants gain better control over their trunk and limbs, they can sit up and reach for toys, which provides a wealth of new stimuli to explore. Piaget argued that this stage is a form of "extending" the infant's self-centered habits to include the environment. When an infant shakes a rattle and hears a sound, the sound becomes the focus of their attention. The pleasure derived from the sound motivates the infant to repeat the shaking motion. This feedback loop is essential for **neural plasticity**, as the brain begins to wire together the motor commands of shaking with the auditory perception of the rattle's noise.

Furthermore, this substage highlights the importance of **environmental contingency**. The infant learns that their actions have consequences, and that the world is, to some extent, predictable and controllable. This sense of agency is vital for the development of **self-efficacy** and motivation. If the environment is responsive--meaning that the infant's actions consistently produce interesting results--the infant is more likely to engage in further exploration. Piaget's detailed observations of his own children provided the empirical basis for these theories, showing that the development of intelligence is not an overnight occurrence but a gradual process of refining and expanding these circular reactions into more sophisticated cognitive structures.

The Mechanisms of Assimilation and Accommodation

Central to the emergence of **secondary circular reactions** are the twin processes of **assimilation** and **accommodation**. These functional invariants are the mechanisms through which all cognitive growth occurs, according to Piagetian theory. **Assimilation** involves the child taking in new information from the environment and fitting it into their existing cognitive frameworks, or schemata. For example, if an infant has already learned the motor pattern for grasping a soft toy, they may attempt to **assimilate** a new object, such as a plastic block, by applying the same grasping motion. This allows the child to integrate new experiences into what they already know, providing a sense of continuity and stability in their learning process.

However, assimilation alone is insufficient for true cognitive advancement; it must be balanced by **accommodation**. Accommodation occurs when the existing schemata are modified to fit new

information that does not quite fit the old patterns. When the infant realizes that a large ball requires two hands to lift instead of one, they must **accommodate** their grasping schema to account for the object's size and weight. In the context of **secondary circular reactions**, these two processes work in tandem. The child repeats a behavior (assimilation) but also adjusts that behavior based on the specific feedback they receive from the object (accommodation). This constant shifting between the two processes leads to **equilibration**, a state of cognitive balance where the child's internal models accurately reflect the external world.

The relationship between **assimilation**, **accommodation**, and **secondary circular reactions** is dynamic and iterative. As the child repeats an action to see an effect, they are essentially testing their hypotheses about the world. Every successful repetition reinforces the schema, while every failure or unexpected result prompts an accommodation. This is why the variety of stimuli is so critical; diverse environments provide more opportunities for the child to encounter information that requires accommodation. This process ensures that the child's cognitive structures become increasingly complex and nuanced, allowing them to move beyond simple physical reactions to a more sophisticated understanding of **external reality**.

The Significance of External Stimuli in Cognitive Development

The role of **external stimuli** cannot be overstated when discussing **secondary circular reactions**. In this stage, the environment serves as the primary laboratory for the developing mind. Stimuli such as bright colors, rhythmic sounds, and varied textures act as the catalysts for action. When a child is exposed to a variety of stimuli, they are presented with a wealth of data to process. This exposure allows them to make vital connections between different sensory inputs. For instance, the visual sight of a bell, the tactile feel of its cold metal, and the auditory sound it produces are all integrated into a single cognitive representation of "bell" through repeated interaction.

A stimulating environment encourages the infant to engage in **exploratory behavior**, which is the precursor to formal learning. If a child's surroundings are static or impoverished, there are fewer opportunities to trigger **secondary circular reactions**, which may lead to slower cognitive maturation. Conversely, an environment rich in responsive objects--toys that light up, make noise, or move when touched--provides constant feedback that fuels the circular reaction loop. This feedback is essential for the development of **associative learning**. The infant begins to associate their internal motor intentions with external sensory outcomes, creating a map of how the world works and how they can influence it.

Moreover, the ability to recognize and respond to **external stimuli** is a fundamental component of **perceptual development**. During the stage of secondary circular reactions, infants become more adept at tracking moving objects and predicting their trajectories. If a child drops a spoon and watches it fall, they may repeat the action to see it fall again. This repetition helps the child develop

depth perception and an understanding of gravity, even if they cannot yet articulate these concepts. The stimuli do not just provide entertainment; they provide the raw materials from which the child builds their understanding of physical laws and object properties.

Building Associations and Cognitive Mapping

The development of **secondary circular reactions** is instrumental in the formation of **cognitive associations**. At this age, the infant's brain is highly plastic, and every repeated interaction with an object strengthens neural pathways. When a child learns that pulling a string results in a music box playing a melody, they are forming a complex association between a motor act, a visual object, and an auditory result. These associations are the building blocks of **memory**. By repeating the action, the child is practicing the retrieval of this information, ensuring that the link between cause and effect is solidified in their long-term memory.

This process of making associations is not limited to simple cause-and-effect pairs; it also involves the categorization of experiences. Through **secondary circular reactions**, infants begin to notice similarities and differences between objects. They might find that shaking a rattle produces a noise, but shaking a pillow does not. This realization leads to the early stages of **classification**. The child begins to group objects based on their functional properties--some things are "noisy," some are "soft," and some are "movable." This ability to categorize information is a higher-order cognitive skill that is essential for language development and logical reasoning later in life.

Furthermore, the **cognitive mapping** that occurs during this stage extends to the child's understanding of their own body in relation to space. As they reach for objects and repeat actions, they are developing a sense of **proprioception** and spatial orientation. They learn how far they need to extend their arm to reach a toy and how much force is required to move it. This spatial awareness is a critical component of **sensorimotor intelligence**. The child is not just learning about the objects themselves, but about the relationship between their own physical presence and the three-dimensional world they inhabit.

Comparative Perspectives: Vygotsky and Social Interaction

While Piaget focused heavily on the individual child's interaction with physical objects, it is important to consider the **socio-cultural perspective** offered by Lev Vygotsky. Vygotsky's theory emphasizes that cognitive development is inherently social. In the context of **secondary circular reactions**, a caregiver often plays a crucial role in providing the stimuli that the child reacts to. For example, a parent might shake a rattle to get the baby's attention, or they might place a toy just within the baby's reach. This social mediation helps to guide the child's attention and provides a structured environment for the circular reactions to occur.

Vygotsky's concept of the **Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)** can be applied here as well.

While the infant is capable of some circular reactions independently, a caregiver can "scaffold" the experience by introducing more complex stimuli that the child cannot yet master on their own. If a child is repeating the action of hitting a drum, a parent might show them how to use a drumstick. This interaction moves the child from a simple **secondary circular reaction** to a more complex behavior that involves tool use. Thus, the development of these cognitive skills is not just a solo journey of biological maturation but a collaborative process involving **social interaction**.

The integration of Piagetian and Vygotskian perspectives provides a more holistic view of **early cognitive development**. Piaget explains the internal mechanisms--the "how" of the circular reaction--while Vygotsky explains the "where" and "with whom" of the learning process. Together, they suggest that while the **secondary circular reaction** is a biological milestone, its expression and complexity are deeply influenced by the child's social environment. This highlights the importance of responsive caregiving and social engagement in the first year of life, as these factors provide the necessary support for the child to fully explore and master their environment.

Implications for Early Childhood Education and Environment

The understanding of **secondary circular reactions** has significant implications for how we design environments for infants, whether in the home or in early childhood education settings. Since infants in this stage learn best through repetition and environmental feedback, it is essential to provide them with **responsive materials**. These are objects that react predictably to the child's touch, such as busy boards, musical instruments, or simple cause-and-effect toys. By providing these materials, educators and parents can foster the development of **intentionality** and problem-solving skills.

In addition to providing the right materials, it is important to allow infants the time and space to engage in **repetitive play**. From an adult perspective, watching a child drop a toy fifty times might seem monotonous, but for the child, it is a vital scientific experiment. Interrupting these circular reactions can hinder the child's ability to fully grasp the underlying cause-and-effect relationship. Therefore, a supportive environment is one that respects the child's need for **repetition** and provides a variety of stimuli to keep the child engaged and challenged. This approach aligns with the idea that children are active participants in their own learning, rather than passive vessels to be filled with information.

Key strategies for supporting development during this stage include:

Providing a **safe and accessible** space where the infant can reach and manipulate a variety of objects.

Introducing toys with different **sensory properties** (textures, sounds, weights) to encourage accommodation.

Engaging in **reciprocal play**, where the adult responds to the child's actions, thereby reinforcing

the social aspect of circular reactions.

Allowing for **uninterrupted exploration**, giving the infant the opportunity to complete the circular loop and solidify their learning.

Longitudinal Impact on Cognitive Skills

The mastery of **secondary circular reactions** is not an end in itself but a foundation for more advanced cognitive milestones. As the child moves out of the third sensorimotor substage, they begin to coordinate these reactions into more complex sequences, known as **coordination of secondary circular reactions** (Substage 4). This later stage involves using one action as a means to achieve another goal, such as moving a cushion to find a hidden toy. Without the initial development of the secondary circular reaction--the understanding that actions have external effects--the child would not be able to develop the **strategic thinking** required for these later stages.

Furthermore, the early development of **associative learning** during this period is linked to later success in language acquisition and symbolic thought. The ability to link a sound with an object is essentially what language is: the association of a phonetic sound with a mental concept or physical item. Research by Gelman and Brenneman (1994) has shown that the processes of **assimilation and accommodation** initiated during these early sensorimotor experiences are the same processes that allow older children to understand complex mathematical concepts and scientific principles. The cognitive architecture built during the first year of life serves as the scaffolding for all subsequent intellectual growth.

In the long term, the sense of **agency and competence** developed through successful circular reactions can influence a child's personality and approach to learning. Children who are given the opportunity to successfully manipulate their environment and see the results of their actions tend to develop a more positive **learning disposition**. They are more likely to be curious, persistent, and confident in their ability to solve problems. Thus, the humble act of a baby repeatedly kicking a mobile is actually the beginning of a lifelong journey of **intellectual discovery** and psychological resilience.

Summary and Conclusion

In conclusion, the **secondary circular reaction** is a fundamental concept in early cognitive development that marks the infant's first meaningful steps toward understanding and controlling the external world. By shifting their focus from internal sensations to environmental consequences, infants begin to build the **cognitive schemata** that will define their intelligence. Through the continuous cycle of **assimilation and accommodation**, they refine these schemata, creating a sophisticated mental map of cause and effect. This stage highlights the critical importance of a

stimulating and responsive environment, as well as the role of social interaction in guiding the child's exploratory efforts.

The implications of this developmental phase extend far beyond infancy, providing the essential building blocks for **memory, language, and problem-solving**. As children learn to recognize and respond to external stimuli, they are developing the very skills that allow humans to learn from their environment and adapt to new challenges. Recognizing the importance of **secondary circular reactions** allows parents, educators, and psychologists to better support infants during this crucial window of growth, ensuring that they have the foundation necessary for a lifetime of cognitive achievement.

Academic References

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