

VYGOTSKY, LEV

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) is the most celebrated Russian psychologist, both in Russia and worldwide. His popularity today is so immense that some authors refer to a “Vygotsky boom” or, somewhat skeptically, a “Vygotsky cult”. Yet, at the same time Vygotsky is the most controversial, mysterious, and self-contradictory Russian psychologist. Thousands of laudatory scholarly papers uniformly glorifying Vygotsky as the founder of virtually any idea in psychology and education are outbalanced by a relatively less often, but fairly consistent, critique of the multitude of conflicting and contradictory “versions of Vygotsky” featured in this literature, Western and Russian alike. Most often the critical Vygotskian literature identifies Western interpretations of Vygotsky as the key to the problem of “understanding Vygotsky” (cf. van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) and calls for getting back to the “original texts”, i.e. Vygotsky’s texts translated into English (Miller, 2011). This, however, hardly solves the problem: the translations appear highly problematic, inadequately selective, and even in certain instances largely distorted (van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011). Furthermore, even the Russian texts of Vygotsky that were posthumously published in the Soviet Union, appear heavily edited, censored for politically incorrect statements, and even in a few cases faked (for the discussion of a case of the so-called “benign forgery” and associated problems see Yasnitsky, 2012). Under these circumstances the most reliable “version of Vygotsky” seems to be the one that develops in the recent studies and publications of the group of “revisionist” scholars, whose research is solidly grounded in archival, historical, and textual materials (see Yasnitsky, 2010; 2012). This revisionist narrative necessarily takes into account the life story of Vygotsky and his Russian and international associates against the background of the socio-cultural history of the interwar period, and addresses (a) the axiomatic base and foundational principles of Vygotsky’s thinking,

(b) the activities of his first, “instrumental period” of 1920s, and (c) the dramatic “holistic revolution” in Vygotsky’s thought and his struggle for the integrated theory of human consciousness and socio-biological and cultural-historical development in the 1930s.

Axiomatic base and foundational principles

Vygotskian scholarship is often criticized for ascribing to Vygotsky certain “pioneering ideas” that, in fact, do not belong to him and, in a few instances, were widely shared by many of his contemporaries. It can be said that the whole set of Vygotsky’s beliefs, attitudes, and values that together constitute the axiomatic base of his theory, belong to this socially shared set of revolutionary ideas of Russian intellectual milieu of early 20th century. Most of these are pretty much at odds with our ideas about the world, at least so from the dominant contemporary “Western” perspective.

First, as a child of his time, Vygotsky spent all his youth in the cultural environment of the provincial town of Gomel within the borders of the Jewish Pale of Settlement at the western outskirts of Russian Empire. Being raised in a prosperous secular Jewish family, Vygotsky received extensive training in a wide range of subjects, but was leaning towards literature, arts, theatre, the history of Jewish people and culture. His earlier writings of the period of his studies at Moscow University (1913-1917) reflect his interest in the topic of literary criticism, romanticism in the German tradition of Wilhelm Humboldt and his followers, mysticism, a preoccupation with “Jewish question”, and a fairly critical attitude towards socialism and related ideas of transformation of society. A major, truly dramatic transformation of the entire system of values took place soon after the Socialist Revolution of 1917 led by the Bolshevik faction of Russian Socialist-Democratic Labour Party (later renamed Communist Party). However, the “romantic” historicism and preoccupation with literature, art, language, and culture remained

among the set of Vygotsky's foundational ideas until the last days of his life.

Second, it is virtually impossible to adequately understand Vygotsky outside the utopian cultural context of Russia that surfaced in the widely shared belief in the possibility of radical transformation of the entire social framework that Vygotsky wholeheartedly espoused soon after the Revolution of 1917. This Soviet idea was not too original, and resonated with a wide range of modernist movements of the early 20th century, for instance, with the American progressivist movement. However, what distinguished the Soviet brand of this progressivism was the firm conviction that human nature—similarly to social life—became the object of Promethean experimental interventions, and that creation of a new, more advanced human type, a higher stage of human evolution, a “new man”, or a genius-like “superman” was one of the current goals of the post-Revolutionary era. In his various writings of the mid-1920s Vygotsky clearly proclaimed his commitment to the messianic mission of creating a new, revolutionary psychological theory of the human psyche and consciousness and, on the other hand, to finding concrete scientific methods of normative production of such “higher”, “new men” of the Communist future.

Third, another important constitutive element of Vygotsky's axiomatic base was his involvement with the official philosophical basis of most of scientific research in humanities and social sciences in the Soviet Union—the philosophy of Marxism. Vygotsky's Marxism had little to do with economic theory or its contemporary political interpretations. Furthermore, in some of his writings he clearly expresses his distaste for direct application of Marxist ideas to psychological theory. Instead, on a higher level of generalization, Vygotsky borrows from Marxism certain principles that appeared to have promise for dealing with the problems he saw in the human sciences. One of these ideas is the imperative to analyze any phenomenon as a dynamic, historically developing process, rather than as being static. Another important idea is the leading role of interpersonal exchange, dialogue, culture, and society in human development.

All these general principles and beliefs that Vygotsky shared with many of his contemporaries inspired his work in diverse and quite often contradictory ways.

“Instrumental” Psychology

Although he wrote copiously on the topics of human development and education, Vygotsky virtually never carried out studies in educational settings. Instead, the main sphere of application of his talents during the most productive last decade of his life (1924-1934) was the field of special education, or “defectology” as it was referred to in the Soviet Union. By analogy with handicapped people using special aids in order to compensate for their physical disabilities, and building on his youthful fascination with Romanticism’s emphasis on cultural processes, Vygotsky created a blend of the two and proposed the idea of “cultural mediation”, that is, the use of special “psychological tools” that are instrumental in human development by helping individuals gain control over their own psychological processes. The utopian, Promethean dimension of Vygotsky’s thinking is particularly clear in his proposal to build a “theory of cultural development of higher psychological functions” on the basis of research on the use by individuals of special instruments to master their own behavior in order to reach higher, more advanced stages of cultural development. In a series of experimental studies that Vygotsky conducted with his associates in 1920s he showed how children who used special auxiliary “stimuli” or “signs” learned to master their “psychological functions” in the experimental settings used to study problem-solving, and could eventually develop “higher” functions such as logical memory or voluntary attention. The idea of external “psychological tools” in facilitating development, according to Vygotsky of 1920s, was supposed to demonstrate the role of culture as the instrument of “mediated”, cultural development. The second most important general idea of Vygotsky’s “instrumental period”—the social origin of the human mind—was supported by

observation of children's performance in these situations of problem-solving, which led

Vygotsky to extensively quote the French scholar Pierre Janet, who in his general law of cultural development stated that every psychological process in its development passes from the external, interpersonal to the internal, intrapersonal stage, or, in other words, gets "internalized".

The ideas of this period were expressed in several scholarly articles that Vygotsky published in the 1920s. Also, he attempted to formulate a general "instrumental" theory of cultural development, but never finished any of the several larger works he was engaged with at that time. These draft manuscripts, however, were uncritically published after Vygotsky's death under the titles that never occur in Vygotsky's records (e.g., *The history of the development of higher mental functions*), with considerable editorial omissions and interventions, and were subsequently commonly believed to present the core of Vygotsky's theory.

Towards "Holistic" Theory

It appears that at the end of the 1920s or the beginning of the 1930s Vygotsky experienced a major personal and professional crisis caused by his utter dissatisfaction with the state of his theory, and a combination of personal, socio-political, and theoretical factors. On a number of occasions in his papers, oral presentations, manuscripts, private notes, and personal correspondence with his associates Vygotsky expressed his criticism of their theory of cultural development for its utter abstractness and unclear practical applicability, and for its radical separation between the higher and the lower psychological functions, the emphasis on the signs and the ignorance of the world of meanings, the gap between intellectual, volitional, and emotional phenomena, and the neglect of the structural and systemic nature of virtually all psychological processes. The whole system of theoretical concepts was undergoing major reconstruction and reformulation in his mind. This radical shift can be best understood as the

dramatic transition from the “instrumentalism” of his earlier period to the “holism” of the last two to three years of his life (1932-1934).

Vygotsky developed his “holistic” views in accordance with his Romantic and Marxist awareness of the priority of personality, culture, and consciousness, and under the influence of German scholars of the Gestalt school, with several of whom he and his associates personally met, corresponded, and collaborated. Holism postulates the priority and the dominance of the whole over the constitutive elements, atoms, components, and parts; as a result holism regards the human being as a whole, integrated organism, rather than being a composite mechanism readily analyzable into parts. It was during the holistic period that Vygotsky abandoned his earlier mechanist speculations about stimuli, reflexes, “psychological instruments”, and reactions, and forcefully argued against research on elements, and in favour of “analysis by units” that preserve all characteristics of the whole. In the writings of this period Vygotsky speculated about a number of such “units of analysis” that would take into account social, personal, intellectual, emotional, and biological characteristics of a human being within his or her psychological environment. Perhaps the most famous Vygotsky’s notion, the “zone of proximal development” that designates the difference between the level a child could achieve when acting without assistance and the level attained via assisted performance, was introduced in Vygotsky’s writings of the last two years of his life (1933-1934), but—like many other innovative ideas of the period—remained only briefly sketched, not operationalized, and underdeveloped theoretically.

The history of the import of Vygotsky’s ideas into the West is well documented (Valsiner, 1988) and is marked by a number of publications of the 1930s, 1960s and 1970s that were initiated mostly by left-leaning intellectuals sympathetic to the Soviet Union or the pro-socialist case and struggling to bring the issues of culture, mind, meaning, and consciousness back into human sciences (see Bruner, 1990). But real popularity in North America did not come

to Vygotsky until 1980s when his ideas were widely disseminated, primarily among the educationists, and presented, quite mistakenly, in sharp contrast to the ideas of Jean Piaget, who had remained a cult figure throughout 1960s-1970s.

However, despite the actual “Vygotsky boom” in North America the imported version of Vygotsky’s theory in the West failed to preserve the whole complexity of Vygotsky’s theory and is largely fragmented, if not misguided. This is why the celebrated notion of the “zone of proximal development” was disseminated as an idea that a child learns from the external input from a “knowledgeable other” that, on the other hand, is fairly distant from the vague and imprecise meaning of this expression in various Vygotsky’s writings of 1933-1934, and, on the other hand, in fact, is quite in agreement with the mainstream behaviorist thinking about learning and development with its emphasis on external “reinforcement”. Therefore, it is the rapidly developing theory and practice of dynamic assessment (see, e.g., Haywood & Lidz, 2006) that remains perhaps the most notable, concrete, and important educational application of Vygotsky-inspired ideas in Western educational system. On the other hand, the integrative and holistic potential of the developmental science advocated by “the Mozart” and “the Beethoven of psychology” Lev Vygotsky and his closest and most important associate Alexander Luria (Toulmin, 1978) that has been largely ignored to date is yet again put on trial in the renewed proposal of the “romantic science” (Sacks, in press) of the integrative cultural-historical and bio-social psychology (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, Ferrari, in press).

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See also Action Research; Bruner, Jerome; Design Experiments; Mediational Theory of Mind; Michael Cole; Progressive Education and Its Critics; Self-Regulation, Development of; Social Cognitive Theory; Utopias.

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