

QUESTIONING

VYGOTSKY'S

LEGACY

Scientific Psychology or Heroic Cult

EDITED BY ANTON YASNITSKY



QUESTIONING VYGOTSKY'S LEGACY

This accessible collection of essays critically examines Vygotsky's scientific legacy. The book is solidly grounded in the "revisionist revolution" context and encourages constructive questioning of Vygotsky's theory of human development. It tackles thought-provoking issues such as the true value of his scholarship, the possible falsification of his scientific legacy, and the role of political factors and the Communist parties in the worldwide dissemination of his work. It is essential reading on Vygotskian psychology and of interest to students and researchers in developmental psychology, history of psychology, history of science, Soviet/Russian history, philosophical science and education.

Anton Yasnitsky, Ph.D., is an independent researcher who specializes in the Vygotsky-Luria Circle. He is the author of *Vygotsky: An Intellectual Biography* (2018) and has co-edited (with René van der Veer and others) *The Cambridge Handbook of Cultural-Historical Psychology* (2014), *Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies* (2015), and *Vygotski revisitado: una historia crítica de su contexto y legado* (2016).

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1

VYGOTSKY'S SCIENCE OF SUPERMAN

From Utopia to concrete psychology

Anton Yasnitsky

Lev Vygotsky and “Vygotskian” buzzwords

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) is definitely the most well-known Russian psychologist worldwide, who is considered among the most prominent thinkers and pioneers in education and developmental psychology these days. Yet, fame does not necessarily go hand in hand with knowledge and understanding. As it was noted twenty years ago, Vygotsky's fame is in reverse relation to the knowledge of his legacy: the more often his name is invoked, the less people seem to understand what the person did as a thinker and practitioner and what exactly his legacy is (Valsiner, 1988). The chief proponents and ardent advocates of his work virtually uniformly refer to him as a genius, almost immediately adding the attribute of “elusive” (or its equivalents) to this “genius” (Bruner, 1985). Then, almost universally they claim the need for “understanding Vygotsky” (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991). Commonly shared opinion of Vygotsky's genius and consensus on his importance and relevance today appears the main reason for his name's appearance on top-100 list of the most prominent psychologists of the 20th century (Haggbloom et al., 2002).

No Vygotsky theory was fully accomplished and published during his lifetime (Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016a). Yet, apparently the field of knowledge exists under the name of “cultural-historical psychology” (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, & Ferrari, 2014) and is directly associated with Lev Vygotsky, his closest collaborator, Alexander Luria (1902–1977) and their legacy. Not only is Vygotsky well known, but also – for a number of reasons – he is very much adored and admired by his self-appointed followers and advocates worldwide. Others just do not know him and his work. This situation has been variably described as the “cult of Vygotsky”, “Vygotsky cult”, or even Vygotsky's “cult of personality” (Yasnitsky, 2012). The origin of this cult dates back to the period of early Stalinism in the 1930s with its cultist atmosphere, the *Zeitgeist*, in the Soviet Union. This was the time when the

god-like status of Vygotsky the “genius” prevailed among a few of his students, as evident from their memoirs of several decades after his death in 1934 (Yasnitsky, 2018). In the post-WWII period the image of Vygotsky the genius was exported from behind the Iron Curtain and gradually spread widely, primarily in the United States, but also in a few other – Anglophone, Francophone, Lusophone and Spanish-speaking – regions of the world. Recent publications provide considerable critical discussion of the cult and its history, the most important of these are the twin volumes in English and Spanish titled “Revisionist Revolution in Vygotsky Studies” (Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016a) and “Vygotski revisitado: Una historia crítica de su contexto y legado” (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, Aguilar, & García, 2016), respectively.

In the absence of a clearly defined theory as such, Vygotsky’s followers have at their disposal a few “Vygotskian” buzzwords, the most popular of which being the so-called “*zone of proximal development*”, the phrase that is alternatively translated from the original Russian “*zona blizhaishego razvitiia*” as the “*zone of potential development*” (Simon, 1987). This way, it is certainly much clearer, but not necessarily to the benefit of the Vygotsky’s fans, who sometimes seem to have preferred the appearance of “scientificity” and obscurity to clarity. This phenomenon is not new in the history of humanity and has been recently described and discussed in the beautiful book of Michael Billig, titled “Learn to write badly: How to succeed in the Social Sciences” (Billig, 2013). Yet, the notion of the “ZPD” – as it is known in its abbreviated form – has for a while guided educationists, who put it on their banners in the struggle for their independence and their original status as the leading force in the classroom that for a while considerably shrank under the influence of various so-called “constructivist” (or “child-centered”) educational theories of the preceding period. These were typically associated with the name of the Swiss scholar and high-ranking practitioner in psychology and education, Jean Piaget (1896–1980), very popular in North America in the 1960s and 1970s and whose influence had started to decrease by the end of his life. Vygotsky’s “zone of proximal development” (with all the associated exotic connotations of a relatively obscure Russian name, the “scientificity” of the phrase and the authority of Vygotsky’s leading advocates in North America, such as Jerome Bruner, 1915–2016) became a helpful metaphor for a new movement in education. The new trend manifested itself in educational theories of “social constructivism” (as opposed to Piaget-associated “constructivism”, or “cognitive constructivism”, of the preceding period of “child-centered” educational theories) and has been somewhat critically and controversially described as a behaviorist restoration in mainstream educational thinking in North America (Yasnitsky, 2014a).

The “ZPD” – although definitely the most popular – is not the only buzzword that is associated with Vygotsky and his alleged legacy. Another buzzword that is often presented in the “Vygotskian” vocabulary is *mediation* (the common English translation of *oposredovanie* or *oposredstvovanie* in Russian) and its derivatives such as *mediate* or *mediated*. Yet, there is nothing distinctly linked to Vygotsky in this word that on number of occasions occurs in the writings of behaviorist writers such as

Vygotsky's and Luria's slightly younger contemporary Burrhus Frederic Skinner (1904–1990), a renowned psychologist and social utopian thinker, in his exciting post-war novel “Walden Two” (Skinner, 1948); Skinner was well-known for his operant conditioning research, applied behavior analysis, and “radical behaviorism” theories. It was in the 1930s that Skinner finished and defended his doctoral study (in 1931) and, somewhat later, published his first book that summarized a decade of his research, in which he used a notion of “verbal field,” which he defined as “that part of behavior which is reinforced only through the mediation of another organism” (Skinner, 1938, p. 116). His later programmatic book of 1957 “Verbal behavior,” published five years before the first major Vygotsky publication appeared in English (Vygotsky, 1962), is often positioned as a manifesto, in effect, of Skinnerian “radical behaviorist” thinking that apparently bears no influences of Vygotsky whatsoever, but still profusely used the term “mediation” in the meaning very close to its use in traditional “Vygotskian” parlance and thought style with its emphasis on the ideas of 1) the subject's personal agency and activity, and 2) voluntary improvement and advancement of psychological performance, supported and facilitated by a peer, or, more generally, “knowledgeable other” and the “social situation of development.”

Skinner defined “verbal behavior as behavior reinforced through the mediation of other persons” (Skinner, 1957, p. 2) and, somewhat in the spirit of “Vygotskian” tradition, repeatedly returned to this idea throughout this book. Furthermore, the phrases “social reinforcement” and even “socially mediated reinforcement” are used in educational literature these days in a manner highly reminiscent of the “zone of proximal development” and “social situation of development” of Vygotsky and, at the same time, of Skinner's “operant conditioning” and “reinforcement”. This choice of vocabulary certainly blurs the lines between the two theoretical systems and makes one wonder about the deeper reasons behind the popularity of Vygotsky's phraseology among educators in North America, who are hitherto apparently still very much under the considerable influence of Skinnerian tradition and, broader, somewhat simplistic and mechanistic behaviorist philosophy (Bandura, 1963; Bandura, 1977). This is why, one might argue, both the Skinnerian and the “Vygotskian” traditions in educational thinking, especially in North America, can be grouped together and thought of as belonging equally to the “social behaviorism” trend and intellectual movement.

There is another reason why *mediation* does not qualify as a notion distinctly originating with Vygotsky. There are contexts in which the word is used in contemporary literature in a fashion that appears quite similar to Vygotsky's discourse. These are typically focused on the mass media, social and cultural issues and their interrelations with psychological performance of people in the contemporary, 21st century world. As an example, consider a book titled “Mediated Memories in the Digital Age” (van Dijck, 2007). What is interesting in this particular case is that such a seemingly pure instance of a “Vygotskian” term – introduced in the early 1930s in perhaps the only really and fully Vygotskian book ever written and published (Leontiev, 1931) and widely popularized since then – the phrase “mediated

memory” is used here without any relation to Vygotsky’s or his associates’ work whatsoever. Indeed, the author is doing pretty well without invocation of any long dead Russian scholar of the 20th century, focuses on the realities of our days, and successfully deals with the issues of media, culture, psychology, and mind in the 21st century, instead. The contexts seem similar, though, and the media that mediate our psychological performance are treated as some kind of “psychological instruments,” but the meaning of the phrase and the direction of discussion is very different, if not opposite to that of Vygotsky. For Vygotsky, these cultural tools are merely relatively insignificant “signs” devoid of their own meaning or importance of their own that are only instrumental in advancing our psychological performance, like in mnemonic experiments on “mediated memory” and its ontogenetic development of Vygotsky and his close associate Aleksei N. Leontiev (1902–1979). For cultural studies like that of José van Dijk, “mediated memory” belongs to a larger topic of “cultural memory” that is supported and preserved by technologies in the Digital Age, but, unlike for Vygotsky, quite to the detriment of individual psychological abilities to memorize, remember, and recall. Simply put, now we do not need to remember as much as before when we did not have the ubiquitous gadgets with easy access to the world wide web as the resource and storage of information of virtually any kind. This naturally brings us to yet another still popular allegedly “Vygotskian” notion.

It is common to attribute the origin of the idea of *the social origin of mind and psychological processes* (also known as *sociogenesis*) to Vygotsky, which seems to compete for the second position on the list of “Vygotskian” ideas, key words, and expressions. This view dates back to the end of the 1970s when a relatively small book came out under the title “Mind in society”, which had been, by admission of its four editors, “constructed” from bits and pieces of the texts of Vygotsky and his associates. Yet, the book was published under Vygotsky’s name and despite an editor’s expectation of an imminent “fiscal disaster, not to say personal embarrassment” (Cole, 2004, p. xi), it became the most well-known “Vygotsky” book and the main source of Vygotsky’s citations in literature, way ahead of all others, until now.

Yet, the idea is absolutely trivial as such, and this is obvious to any loving and caring parent, at least. Mowgli can speak and reasonably think only in a work of fiction – a book or a movie – but in the real life a child born to human parents and raised by wolves or monkeys will develop into a wild “feral child”, and nothing else. The saddest critical cases of socially neglected, abused and abandoned children only prove the rule. Then, the theories based on the idea of sociogenesis – the *sociogenetic theories* – are numerous and proliferated well before Vygotsky. In their excellent book “The Social Mind”, Valsiner and van der Veer (2000) provide a convincing discussion of the “construction of the idea” and related theories by Vygotsky’s predecessors and contemporaries. The earliest known efforts of the kind that are documented by these two authors date back to the time when Lev Vygotsky was not yet born. Apparently, Vygotsky might be considered a pioneer and an innovator, by some, but definitely not along this line of sociogenetic thinking. We largely owe this understanding to Valsiner and van der Veer and

their splendid work. Besides, the idea of social origin of the human psyche is particularly self-evident nowadays, in the era of the absolute dominance of pervasive social media and social networks, so that a reference to any author – especially one who lived more than a century ago and died before the first electronic computer was produced – is hardly needed now, in the 21st century in order to support any sociogenetic claim.

This might be the reason for what appears as the beginning of the decline of Vygotsky's fame and the popularity of Vygotsky's writings on the "mind and society" as measured by Google Scholar citation rate. Indeed, over the last four decades Vygotsky's citation rate has continuously grown from the 1970s and 1980s (Valsiner, 1988) well into the 21st century. This process continued until roughly 2015–2016 when the trend changed for the first time, and started to decline. This process is highly reminiscent of a similar one, a few decades ago, when Jean Piaget's prominence in North America started shrinking. Nonetheless, Piaget has remained a scholarly celebrity and the classic of developmental psychology. What a few decades ago looked like – in stock market parlance – a "Piaget citation bubble" seems to repeat these days as the "Vygotsky bubble" that started shrinking most recently, to the yet unknown end (Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016b).¹

Science of Superman: Vygotsky's utopia

As it is already perfectly clear from considerable research and publications (Chaiklin, 2003; Valsiner & van der Veer, 1993), "Vygotskian ZPD" is neither original, nor the most essential of Vygotsky's contributions to the social and human sciences. First, the notion of "zone" migrated into Vygotsky's work from his contemporary German American scholar Kurt Lewin (1890–1947), the founder of the so-called "topological and vector psychology" and, allegedly, "field theory" in psychology. The analogy between the "zone" and "field" is quite clear, and Lewin's considerable influence on Vygotsky of the last two or three years of the latter's life is well documented and discussed at length (Yasnitsky, 2018; Yasnitsky & van der Veer 2016a). On the other hand, the idea of measuring the difference between an individual's actual performance and the potential performance of this individual in the situation of facilitated, peer-assisted problem-solving, first appeared in the work of Vygotsky's American contemporary Dorothea McCarthy, and Vygotsky did duly acknowledge the original authorship of this borrowing. Second, the "ZPD" does not appear in Vygotsky thinking and writing until 1933, and figures on the margins of his work at the time (Chaiklin, 2003).

In contrast, there is one idea that apparently passed through Vygotsky's entire academic career in the last decade of his life, and in different shapes, forms, phrasings and formulations resurfaced and re-emerged in his thought. The idea is old and dates back to the period of European Renaissance or even earlier, but in Vygotsky's case, he borrowed it from inflammatory writings and oral speeches of one of the most prominent leaders of the Russian Communist Party, Lev Trotskii (1879–1940), or Leon Trotsky, which is the traditional spelling of his name in

English. In his newspaper article (later included in his book of 1924, republished in 1925), Trotsky proclaimed the distant goal of a “new man” that would eventually come about after Russian Revolution as a result of a deliberate effort at beautification and perfection of human soul and nature. This would be the Superman of the Communist future, and the average person of the future would reach the peaks of the human genius of the pre-Revolutionary period, the greatest artists and thinkers like Aristotle, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, and Karl Marx, whereas the peaks of the “new man” of the future would far surpass what we have known about human being. Trotsky never bothered even to hint how exactly this would happen, and this was not a goal of his – a poet and prophet of Russian Revolution as he was. Yet, to Vygotsky, who exactly at that time was entering the field of academic research, the timing was perfect, and the call for the Superman fell into the well-prepared soil of Vygotsky’s own youthful prophetic stance and eager post-Revolutionary zeal of the self-identified creator of the “new world”. This call for the “new man” first appeared and was publicly presented in his discourse as early as his presentation at the Psychoneurological Congress in Petrograd (immediately thereafter renamed Leningrad) in January 1924, and continuously reappeared in Vygotsky’s proclamations of the forthcoming “new psychology”, “new man”, “socialist alteration of the man”, and the “peak psychology” that would explore the heights (as opposed to the depths, like in the Freudian “depth psychology”) of human performance and existence (Yasnitsky, 2014b).

This was definitely a utopia. There was no clear understanding how this Superman of Communism would appear, or, more precisely, how this new human type would be constructed, raised, educated, remolded, not to mention how this new human being would look like. Yet, Vygotsky seemed to have firmly believed that this was his own, original, and the only possible pathway in science: the “new psychology” of and for the “new man”. The image of the Superman was too strong and too compelling to resist the temptation of its promise. To relate the story of Vygotsky’s struggle for the “new psychology” would equate to the task of narrating the story of his life and writing down a fundamentally novel intellectual biography of Vygotsky. Luckily, such a 21st century account of Vygotsky’s life and legacy has just been published (Yasnitsky, 2018). Thus, let us just focus on some highlights – and related buzzwords – of Vygotsky’s transition from his Superman utopia to concrete psychology and how these relate to this very book the reader is now holding in her or his hands.

From utopia to philosophy: Marxism

Vygotsky lived in a time and place that was very different from that of where and when most readers of this book live. Specifically, his scholarly career spanned the post-Revolutionary period of the Soviet Russia, which imposed a few idiosyncratic limitations on him. One needs to understand that Soviet Russia was a new state in the process of its development, and this formation of the new state took place under the more or less strict control of the one-party political system, which, in

turn, was established with respect to the precepts of a specific philosophical system. This philosophy had been introduced by the great German thinker and political activist Karl Marx (1818–1883) and his long-time friend and collaborator Friedrich Engels (1820–1895). This was the official ideology of the state and all its social institutions. Science and academic research was among them (Joravsky, 1961).

Thus, Vygotsky was compelled to be a Marxist of some kind, by the nature of his vocation. Yet, unlike a great many of his peers, Vygotsky was apparently quite enthusiastic about the post-Revolutionary social project and the promise of the controlled evolution of the human being of the Communist kind, therefore, the call for a new, Marxist psychology came as quite natural and desired for him. In other words, Vygotsky was a social and socialist activist of the post-Revolutionary type, and a great sympathizer of the Communist (also referred to as the “Bolshevik”) government. He even participated in its work at different periods of his life as a mid-level bureaucrat in the administrative structures of *Narkompros* (roughly, equivalent to a Ministry of Science, Culture and Education) and the local organs of the people’s councils, the *Soviet* of one of Moscow’s inner-city regions. Vygotsky’s philosophical sympathies and inclinations, thus, were reflected in his empirical scientific studies and theoretical interpretations, and vice versa.

Yet, this is where further questions arise. Vygotsky was a university-educated intellectual, but not a philosopher by training. He never wrote a considerable scholarly work of his own, a thesis or dissertation in philosophy proper, like his slightly older contemporaries and the most renowned peer psychologists in Russia such as Sergei Rubinstein (1889–1960) or Dimitri Uznadze (1887–1950). Furthermore, Vygotsky did not participate in philosophical debates of his time, never published a work in a philosophical journal, and was not read by Soviet Marxist philosophers (at least not during his lifetime). Besides, even for an avid reader self-educated in the field of Marxist philosophy, the task of deliberately creating a psychological theory (and related experimental and social practice) on the basis of a philosophical system is a huge enterprise. It is highly questionable if such an undertaking is in principle achievable for a thinker self-taught in psychology and philosophy (such as Vygotsky), even the brightest and the smartest one.

Vygotsky appears to have been fully aware of the magnitude and the complexity of the task. In his unfinished manuscript of the mid-1920s he pointed out that “dialectical method is far from universally applicable to biology, history, and psychology”. A “system of intermediate, concrete, applied to specific discipline concepts” was needed in addition. Such “system of concepts”, according to Vygotsky, is the “methodology” of specific scientific discipline. Furthermore, Vygotsky drew the parallel between the Marxist philosophical system and *dialectical materialism* and between its specific implementation in a scientific discipline and *historical materialism*:

The *direct* application of the theory of *dialectical materialism* to the problems of natural science and in particular to the group of biological sciences or psychology is *impossible*, just as it is *impossible* to apply it *directly* to history and

sociology. It is thought that the problem of “psychology and Marxism” can be reduced to creating a psychology which is up to Marxism, but in reality it is far more complex. Like history, sociology is in need of the intermediate *special theory* of historical materialism which explains the *concrete* meaning, for the given group of phenomena, of the abstract laws of dialectical materialism. In exactly the same way we are in need of an as yet undeveloped but inevitable theory of biological materialism and psychological materialism as an intermediate science which explains the concrete application of the abstract theses of dialectical materialism to the given field of phenomena.

Vygotsky, 1997b, p. 330

In the late 1980s a Russian author reflected on the path of development of Russian and Soviet psychology as a discipline and commented on the task of creating a Marxist psychology that was put forward and briefly outlined in the 1920s and 1930s. Yet, the goal remained unfulfilled in the period from the 1940s through to the 1970s and, in the late 1980s, was still an unsolved problem as much as it was during Vygotsky’s lifetime (Radzikhovskii, 1988). This conclusion still holds true now, at the end of the second decade of the 21st century.

Therefore, the questions of interest on the topic of Vygotsky’s Marxism are related to the depth and intellectual integrity of his philosophical preparation and performance in application to psychology as theoretical and empirical science. Thus, for instance, there are publications that tend to present Vygotsky as a Marxist thinker of enormous magnitude and importance (Ratner & Silva, 2017). On the other hand, this view is indirectly contested by some publications that present Vygotsky’s attempts of Marxist psychology as quintessentially shallow and “vulgar Marxist” instances of the so-called “economic reductionism” (Lamdan & Yasnitsky, 2016).

The problem of understanding Vygotsky’s Marxism remains underdeveloped both in Russia and the rest of the world. Given the interest in this theme among the left-leaning intellectuals around the world, perhaps, primarily those in Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking South and Central America, the Marxist foundations of psychology (and, specifically, of Vygotsky-influenced psychology) will predictably remain an important and highly debatable issue for years to come. For a discussion of the topic of Vygotsky’s Marxism see Chapter 2, “Vygotsky and Marx – resetting the relationship”, authored by Peter E. Jones.

From philosophy to a theory and concrete psychology

By Vygotsky’s own admission, the science of Superman must be inspired by Marxist philosophy, but in order to become a concrete psychology it requires an intermediate layer of scientific vocabulary characteristic of and applied to this specific scientific discipline. Such vocabulary is the conceptual apparatus of the potential Marxist psychology, which makes the use of words and phraseology particularly important. This explains our interest in the words that are used in

discussions of the “Vygotskian” psychology as we typically know it nowadays. The complete analysis of the entire network of special words and phrases is an enormous task beyond the scope of this paper. Yet, it seems worthwhile to focus on just a few of these such as “internalization”, “higher psychical (mental, cognitive, psychological) functions” and “cultural-historical” theory in psychology.

“Internalization”

There is a range of other buzzwords that are commonly associated with Vygotsky as his alleged innovations in science. One of these is the so-called “*internalization*”, the word that Vygotsky used in a few works, perhaps, most notably in his untitled, unfinished and abandoned manuscript that was later published under the totally ridiculous and falsified title “The history of the development of higher psychic functions”. What makes this title ridiculous is the fact that the text has virtually nothing to do with any “history” whatsoever, and the phrase ascribed to him as the key term and the foundation of the whole theory runs contrary to what Vygotsky strongly and openly objected. Not only did Vygotsky use the word *internalization* (and its derivatives) in a few works, but also – when he did – he did so very rarely, from purely quantitative standpoint. Table 1.1 presents the data.

TABLE 1.1 The frequency of use of the word “internalization” (and its derivatives) in the six-volume *Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky* (Plenum/Kluwer Press, 1987, 1993, & 1997–1999)

	<i>Vol. 1</i>	<i>Vol. 2</i>	<i>Vol. 3</i>	<i>Vol. 4</i>	<i>Vol. 5</i>	<i>Vol. 6</i>	<i>Total</i>
Vygotsky's own text	–	2	–	6	3	–	11
Not Vygotsky's text (comments, introductions, indexes, etc.)	2	7	14	3	4	2	32
Total	2	9	14	9	7	2	43

The “original” Russian word is “interiorizatsiia”. In his publications Vygotsky used the word in quotation marks in order to underline its foreign, borrowed, alien nature. (These quotation marks were later removed in his posthumous publications and republications.) Yet, in English, the word has yet another translation that should certainly be taken into consideration, especially since it also occurs in the *Collected Works*, translated by a few different individuals. The alternative English translation is “interiorization”. It is even more illustrative to have a look at how often Vygotsky – as opposed to his followers, opponents, editors, publishers, and censors (quite often the very same individuals) – used it in his collected works (see Table 1.2).

TABLE 1.2 The frequency of use of the word “interiorization” (and its derivatives) in the six-volume *Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky* (Plenum/Kluwer Press, 1987, 1993, & 1997–1999)

	<i>Vol. 1</i>	<i>Vol. 2</i>	<i>Vol. 3</i>	<i>Vol. 4</i>	<i>Vol. 5</i>	<i>Vol. 6</i>	<i>Total</i>
Vygotsky’s own text	–	–	–	1	1	3	5
Not Vygotsky’s text (comments, introductions, indexes, etc.)	2	2	–	3	–	15	22
Total	2	2	–	4	1	18	27

Finally, the cumulative data for both “internalization” and “interiorization” (and their derivatives and cognate words) are presented in Table 1.3.

TABLE 1.3 The frequency of cumulative use of the words “internalization” and “interiorization” (and their derivatives) in the six-volume *Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky* (Plenum/Kluwer Press, 1987, 1993, & 1997–1999)

	<i>Vol. 1</i>	<i>Vol. 2</i>	<i>Vol. 3</i>	<i>Vol. 4</i>	<i>Vol. 5</i>	<i>Vol. 6</i>	<i>Total</i>
Vygotsky’s own text	–	2	–	7	4	3	16
Not Vygotsky’s text (comments, introductions, indexes, etc.)	4	9	14	6	4	17	54
Total	4	11	14	13	8	20	70

For a better illustration, all these statistics have been summarized in a simple pie diagram in Figure 1.1.

Let us pause for a moment to think about what these data show and what this possibly means. It is perfectly clear that a collection of works of an author must consist mostly of this author’s texts. Exceptions are not unthinkable, but this is definitely the case with this particular edition: despite a “layer” – or, more precisely, two layers – of quite lengthy additional materials added to this collection by the original Russian and, then, Anglophone editors and commentators, their cumulative text within the *Collected Works* slightly exceeds twenty percent in the most generous assessment (see Figure 1.2). Given that “interiorizatsiia” is commonly believed to be one of Vygotsky’s fundamental ideas, one would expect it to be a very frequent term that would occur in his texts at least as often as in the texts of others. Yet, what we observe is dramatically different from expectations based on such an assumption. First, Vygotsky used the word 16 times within a 1,695-page corpus of his writings and transcribed oral presentations included into the six volumes of his *Collected Works*. This means slightly less than 2.7 instances on

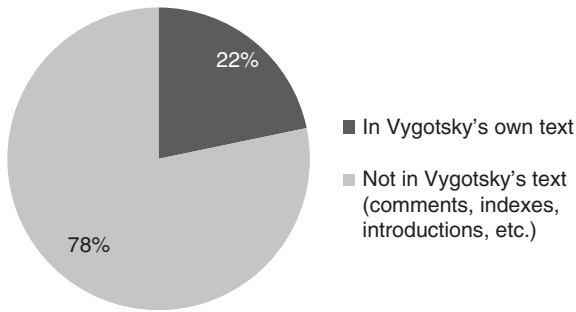


FIGURE 1.1 The ratio of the occurrence of the words “internalization” and “interiorization” (*interiorizatsiia*) and their derivatives in the six-volume *Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky* (Plenum/Kluwer Press, 1987, 1993, & 1997–1999)

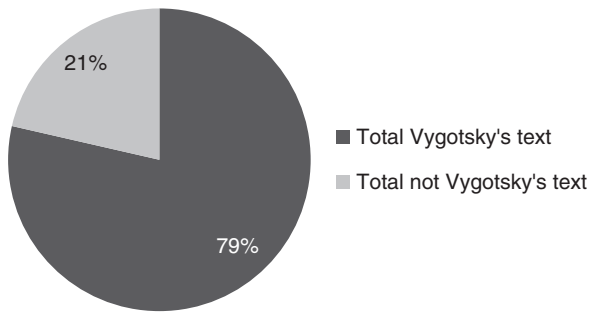


FIGURE 1.2 The ratio between Vygotsky's and not Vygotsky's text in the six-volume *Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky* (Plenum/Kluwer Press, 1987, 1993, & 1997–1999)

average per volume. Second, other authors' use of the word in their discussion of Vygotsky and his legacy considerably exceeds the use of the word by the author and the alleged proponent and advocate of the “term”: roughly, the word occurs well over 15 times more often in supplementary “Vygotskiana” than in Vygotsky!

Volume 3 (of the English edition, which corresponds to volume one of the Russian edition) is particularly illustrative in this respect and provides a hint at understanding what stands behind this highly strange and most curious phenomenon. Indeed, in the texts that are presented here, Vygotsky never used the word “interiorizatsiia”. In sharp contrast, in Alexei N. Leontiev's introduction to the whole six-volume collection (originally published in volume 1 of the Russian edition and translated here), the word is used 13 times, and another time it occurs in the index of the book. Something is definitely and fundamentally wrong here, and it is obvious that the terminological system of those who talk and write about Vygotsky is utterly different from either Vygotsky's own conceptual apparatus or the use of this very term in theoretical psychological systems that are considerably different from that of Vygotsky. For a discussion of the independent use of

“internalization” in other psychological systems see Schafer, 1968. How exactly this situation developed is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is clear that considerable research is needed in order to get a better understanding of this huge gap between Vygotsky and the self-proclaimed “Vygotskians”, Russian and Western alike. Luckily, some important work has already been done in this area. A good example of this work is presented in the direct predecessor of this volume – a recent book titled “Revisionist revolution in Vygotsky studies” (Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016a).

In sum, Vygotsky’s brief and episodic flirtation in 1930–1931 with an awkward metaphor of “internalization” (or “interiorization”) was overinflated and exaggerated beyond any reasonable measure in the writings of the “Vygotskians”, who did exactly what he objected to: substantializing – presenting something as existing as such independently and separately – the individual human “psyche” (“mind”, “cognition”) and making it the main object of their research. Instead, those willing to remain true to the spirit of Vygotsky’s proposal would need to reconsider the vague metaphor of the “internalization” and substitute it with a more elaborate and refined conceptual apparatus, for instance, based on the notions of dialogue and the like (Bertau & Karsten, 2018). On the other hand, this case is also interesting from the perspective of the research on the social construction and global dissemination of “Vygotskiana”. Good examples of such research can be found in this very book: in Chapter 5 by Peter Keiler that discusses the situation in the Soviet Union and Chapter 6 and Chapter 7 by Clay Spinuzzi and Luciano Nicolás García, respectively, who focus on the affairs outside the USSR.

“Higher” (psychological): functions, systems, processes and behavior

So, there is a notable gap between the considerable popularity of “internalization” among the so-called “Vygotskians” and its use in Vygotsky’s own texts, used rarely and *ad hoc*, i.e. on just a few special occasions: virtually half of all noticed instances belong to volume 4 of the English edition of the Collected Works, where the word appears in the text of an unfinished manuscript from around 1930. Unlike “internalization”, Vygotsky frequently talked and wrote about a wide range of “the higher” functions, phenomena and processes in psychological research and practice. Vygotsky typically experimented with his scientific terminology and did not leave a rigorous and consistent system of scientific notions. His terminology and word use are constantly in flux, like in this specific case, and he used the attribute “the higher” in very different phrases and word combinations. Two remarks are in place, though.

First, the meaning of the word as Vygotsky uses it in his texts is far from clear. He never gave a precise definition of “higher” in his works, but made it clear that its opposite is “lower”, which he also never rigorously defined. The original Russian adjective “vysshii” (“vysshie” in plural) allows for two distinct interpretations of the word: the comparative “higher” and the superlative “highest”. Vygotsky’s original proposal of the Science of Superman suggests the reading in favor of the superlative “highest”. Yet, the usual opposition of the “higher”

(Russian: “vysshie”) and the “lower” (Russian: “nizshie”) in Vygotsky’s text suggests the alternative interpretation in favor of the comparative “higher”. This is the ambiguity of Vygotsky’s use of the word we have to live with, and this is no doubt an alarming issue for a good scientific theory as far as its most basic terminology is concerned. Furthermore, the metaphor of the opposing “higher” and “lower” functions eventually lost its intellectual force for Vygotsky when, in his public presentation made for a relatively limited circle of his associates on 4 December 1932, he admitted:

The higher and lower functions are not built in two floors: their number and names do not coincide. But neither our previous conception [is correct]: the higher function is the mastery of the lower one (voluntary attention is the subordination of involuntary attention), for this also implies two floors.

Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 275

Second, in one respect Vygotsky is unusually – and very uncharacteristically for him – consistent in word use. He very explicitly and vehemently attacked the idea of pure “psychical (mental, cognitive) functions” and strongly insisted on the “psychological functions” instead. Vygotsky quoted the passage from Max Wertheimer, a strong advocate of the unified, holistic approach: “Think of someone dancing. In his dance there is joy and grace. How is that? Does it represent on the one hand a display of muscles and movement of the limbs, and on the other hand psychic consciousness? No” (Wertheimer, 1944, p. 96). In the spirit of this quote and related vantage point, Vygotsky stated in his Russian publication of 1930:

Dialectical psychology [...] does not mix up the psychic(al) [i.e., the mental, cognitive, etc.] and physiological processes. It accepts the non-reducible qualitatively unique nature of the psyche [i.e., the mind]. But it does claim that psychological processes are unitary. We thus arrive at the recognition of unique psycho-physiological unitary processes. These represent the higher forms of human behavior, which we suggest calling psychological processes, in contradistinction to psychic(al) [i.e., mental, cognitive, etc.] processes and in analogy with what are called physiological processes.

Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 113

Apparently, this distinction between the “psychological” and the “psychic” was very important for Vygotsky, who was often careless about the precision of formulations. Indeed, he preserved his methodological stance on the unitary notion of the “psychological” throughout the 1930s, and reiterated the importance of this distinction in one of his last notes (on the psychology of thinking) that he scribbled roughly a month before his death in 1934. This quote might also give an idea as to why this distinction was so important from Vygotsky’s viewpoint.

As soon as we separated thinking from life (from the dynamics), we viewed it as a concept of the psychic and not as a concept of the psychological. We blocked all roads to the clarification and explanation of its most important property: to determine the lifestyle and behavior, to act, to influence.

Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 487

Therefore, the idea of Vygotsky dealing with anything “higher psychic(al)” appears impossible, given Vygotsky’s theoretical standpoint. Yet, there is a phrase, which is commonly attributed to Vygotsky and is very popular, especially among Russian psychologists of the last half century or so, starting with the first post-WWII generation. The phrase is: the “*higher psychic(al) functions*” (alternatively, “higher mental, intellectual or cognitive functions”; “*vysshie psikhicheskie funktsii*” in original Russian, which is often commonly abbreviated as “VPF”). There is a definite contradiction here. In order to resolve it, the phrase was put on a serious textological and historiographic trial. The main conclusion of this research is the finding that the phrase in question appears to be yet another fabrication and falsification of Vygotsky’s legacy and texts in the post-humous publications. The phrase never occurs in Vygotsky’s writings, either published during his lifetime or in his archival documents. For a detailed and in-depth discussion of this discovery see Chapter 5, authored by Peter Keiler, who presents his meticulously researched “history of the social construction” of “Vygotskian” tradition and related terminology. This discovery was further corroborated by a newly published volume with the archival materials that comprise an impressive selection of Vygotsky’s notebooks and notes that Vygotsky wrote in order to keep important ideas for himself or for private use, his future works plans and drafts, or some other documents created for a wide range of occasionally personal, but mainly public scientific events. The twin volumes are available in Russian and English, both under the editorship of Ekaterina Zavershneva and René van der Veer (Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2017; Zavershneva & van der Veer 2018)

From the studies of Vygotsky’s works finished and published during his lifetime (Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016a), we see that Vygotsky’s ambitious project of the Science of Superman in its various guises was never accomplished as such, especially at the theoretical, conceptual level. Perhaps, the most important and significant of Vygotsky’s contributions to psychological science is his work associated with a number of themes and topics covered in his posthumously published collection of essays published under the title “Thinking and speech” in late 1934 in Russian, then partially – the last chapter only – translated into English and published in 1939 (Vygotsky, 1939). Then, the work first appeared in English in a very abbreviated translation, yet included all seven chapters of the book, in 1962 (Vygotsky, 1962). The most important of Vygotsky’s innovations presented in this book concerns his work on what he believed to be a study on conceptual development in children and his speculations on the presumably multidirectional

transitions between the observable “external” speech, so-called “internal speech”, and non-verbal thinking. These topics truly constitute Vygotsky's original empirical and theoretical research and have long been believed to be his claim for fame in psychology as his investigation of the concrete “higher psychological” processes in their dynamics and historical development, although notably influenced by German philological tradition (Bertau, 2014; Werani, 2014).

However, this research on language and thinking appears problematic and underwent considerable scrutiny lately. It seems vulnerable to criticisms of various sorts, especially from contemporary linguists and psycholinguists, who question a number of Vygotsky's basic assumptions as well as the design and execution of his studies. Thus, a particular example of a critique of Vygotsky's theorizing about conceptual development, language, speech, and thinking was put on trial in a recent important and audacious study (Zhang, 2013), which is presented in this very book in Chapter 3 titled “Rethinking Vygotsky: A critical reading of the semiotics in Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Theory”, authored by Ruihan Zhang.

“Cultural-historical” theory as concrete psychology that was not

Vygotsky's utopian Science of Superman of the Communist future, his unconditional belief in the plasticity and mutability of the human mind and body, the idiosyncratically interpreted Marxist philosophy, the ever evolving “higher psychological” processes, and, finally, the striving towards the concrete psychology – all these merged into a particularly interesting blend in a Vygotsky-Luria research project that they jointly carried out in the naturalistic settings of the rapid forceful collectivization of Uzbek peasants in Central Asia in 1931–1932. This project has for a long time been interpreted as one of the greatest success stories of the so-called “cultural-historical” psychology, but – as recent studies convincingly demonstrate – it was in fact probably the worst ever failure of Vygotsky and Luria in their way of creating a Marxist concrete psychology outside the psychological laboratory. This case study has already been sufficiently discussed elsewhere (Allik, 2013; Goncharov, 2013; Lamdan, 2013; Lamdan & Yasnitsky, 2016; Proctor, 2013; Yasnitsky, 2013a; Yasnitsky, 2013b), but it has also been revisited in this book in Chapter 4, written by Eli Lamdan, that focuses on Vygotsky's “significant other” – Alexander Luria – and deals with his contribution to and influence upon Vygotsky's legacy in the making.

However, the case of this phrase, the “cultural-historical” psychology (or theory) is of particular interest not only because of this. “Cultural-historical psychology” seems to be the terminological label reserved for Vygotsky's (or, in more recent accounts, Vygotsky's and Luria's) brand of psychological theory. A handbook of “cultural-historical psychology” published by Cambridge University Press under the editorship of Anton Yasnitsky, René van der Veer and Michel Ferrari in 2014 demonstrates the wide range of theoretical tenets, methodological principles, and a variety of applications, both within and outside psychology proper (Yasnitsky et al.,

2014). The last chapter of the book, contributed by the late medical doctor, visionary neuroscientist and best-selling author Oliver Sacks (1933–2015), quite correctly characterizes this intellectual legacy as a “Romantic Science” (Sacks, 2014), widely known under the label of “cultural-historical psychology”. Yet, there is one main problem here: neither Vygotsky nor Luria would ever call it by this name. Indeed, in his discussion of his theory that has been found among Vygotsky’s archival notes the statement is perfectly clear.

NB! The name, the designation that we lack. [...] *Not* instrumental, *not* cultural, *not* signifying, *not* constructive, etc. Not just because of the mixing up with other theories, but also because of its intrinsic obscurity: For example, the idea of the analogy with an instrument = just scaffolding, more essential is the *dissimilarity*. Culture: But where does culture itself come from? (It is not primary, but this is hidden.)

Zavershneva & van der Veer, 2018, p. 121

True, a Marxist psychological theory must take into consideration culture, but cannot be “cultural” and exactly for the reason that Vygotsky provides that culture, according to the Marxist worldview, belongs to the “superstructure” and as such is a derivative of the economic “base” of society and the concrete historical “mode of production”. The “base”, in turn, is constituted by the complex interplay of the “productive forces” and the “relations of production”. In this sense, Vygotsky is perfectly right: “culture is not primary”, and something else – some other, deeper processes and forces – stand behind it, and “this is hidden”, therefore, culture cannot serve as an explanatory principle. This is a theoretical rationale behind the reasoning why Vygotsky’s Marxist psychology and his Science of Superman – both in the making – could not and cannot be named “cultural”. There is another reason: a historical one.

Peter Keiler did a meticulous study of the terminology that Vygotsky, Luria, their supporters, opponents, and associates used for several decades. This study is presented in much detail in Keiler’s Chapter 5, titled “A history of the social construction of the ‘Cultural-Historical’”. In brief the study came to a surprising conclusion that Vygotsky, Luria and their associates never used the phraseology of “cultural-historical” theory, school, or psychological tradition in order to describe their research. However, curiously enough, Keiler argues that “cultural-historical” phraseology originally was introduced in the mid-1930s by critics of these scholars with defamatory aims and was later appropriated by a larger psychological community of scholars – including those that identified themselves as Vygotsky’s followers. Keiler provides an explanation of this rather strange situation and proposes that this is an instance of a psychological defense mechanism that, in the terminology of the post-Freudian psychological tradition, he refers to as “identification with the aggressor”.

In the aftermath of the period of the “Thaw” in the Soviet Union (roughly a decade after the death of Joseph Stalin in 1953) the Soviet “Vygotskians” such as

Leontiev, Luria and their supporters had established, in sociological terminology, strong patron-client relations by that time and, thus, constituted the primary members of the Leontiev-Luria clan in the Soviet psychological community. This clan worked with gears of power in Soviet and even international psychology: both Leontiev and Luria were top-level administrators not only in Soviet institutions (e.g. Leontiev became the founding dean of the one of the first two Departments of Psychology in the USSR, in 1966), but also in major international psychological organizations, such as International Union of Psychological Science (Leontiev served the member of the Executive Committee of this organization in 1960–1966 and 1969–1976, its Vice-President in 1966–1969, and Luria also being a Committee member in 1948–1951, the Executive Committee member in 1966–1969 and Vice-President in 1969–1972) (Rosenzweig et al., 2000). This was the time when the term “cultural-historical” became generally accepted among Soviet scholars as a quintessentially “Vygotskian” label.

“Vygotskian” concrete psychology against the challenges of the 21st century

As we see it was not until the 1960s and 1970s that “Vygotskian” psychology spread widely outside the walls of Moscow State University that harbored the majority of Soviet “Vygotskians”. Interestingly, this process developed at virtually the same time and in parallel courses in both the Soviet Union and abroad. In the East, the “Vygotskian” label was used mainly as a “lowest common denominator” and the legitimization of the alleged theoretical unity of several disparate, virtually unrelated psychological theories such as Leontiev’s quasi-Marxist theoretical speculations and Luria’s psychoneurological clinical research and practice, and a few loosely interrelated developmental psychological theories of Lidiia Bozhovich, Piotr Gal’perin, Daniil El’konin and his closest collaborator (and Gal’perin’s former student) Vasili Davydov – all but Davydov former associates of Vygotsky. All these psychological studies were often portrayed as growing from common a “Vygotskian” root, but allegedly belonging to the same theoretical stem, Leontiev’s so-called “activity theory”.

In the West, “Vygotskiana” advanced in a number of different ways depending on time and place, but in North America – perhaps the main “importer” and, then, global “distributor” of non-Soviet “Vygotskian” science – it was assimilated under the somewhat curious blended phraseology of the so-called “cultural-historical activity theory”, also known under its abbreviation as CHAT. Not only have Western scholars *appropriated* some “Vygotskian” ideas, but they have also *adapted* them in accordance with their needs and local goals in the social contexts of their lives, work, and research. Thus, quite naturally, these “Vygotskian” ideas, isolated from their original context and deprived of the minds of their originators and earliest advocates, would get “alienated” and stride quite far away from what they originally might have meant. The story of these ideas’ reception, social construction and reconstruction, and, in a few instances, transnational circulation

constitutes a truly exciting field of recent (Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016a; Yasnitsky et al., 2016) and future research, the first good examples of which can be found in the last two chapters of this very book, authored by Clay Spinuzzi and Luciano Nicolás García. All interested readers are invited to enjoy the logic and beauty of their analysis and presentation.

Yet, the question remains: now that Vygotsky's citation rates have started gradually decreasing and his popularity as a proponent of a "social constructivism" is apparently declining, what is the future of "Vygotskiana" in the 21st century? For some, Vygotsky is and will remain an undisputable authority and a thinker far "ahead of his time", whose relevance in the contemporary context is beyond any doubt. This is worldview and attitude to Vygotsky that was born in the period of early Stalinism in the Soviet Union that one of his former students thus described as late as the end of the 1980s:

Even if there was anything funny about him, we never took it as funny, because nothing related to him could have been funny. We never judged him by human standards. He was a genuine spiritual father to us. We trusted him in everything without any limit. We related to him as disciples to Christ.

Vygodskaya & Lifanova, 1996, p. 256

This position can perhaps be best described as the "heroic cult" of Vygotsky the genius. This standpoint is the extreme that identifies the frontier of the traditionalist, conservative and "archaic" strand in global "Vygotskiana". The alternative, "futuristic" worldview and assessment of Vygotsky's legacy in psychology can be found in the memoirs of another of Vygotsky's somewhat more distant associates, Piotr Gal'perin, who did acknowledge Vygotsky's genius in his interview of the same period in the late 1980s, but then presented a more critical stance towards his scientific legacy and gave quite a pessimistic assessment of its future.

In my view, he was the only real man of genius in the history of Russian and Soviet psychology. He was also a child of his time. To those in the West who are so enthusiastic now about Vygotsky I want to say that they are considerably delayed in turning to him. In the meantime, we have made some progress, not so much from a theoretical point of view, but, I should rather say, from a historical one. In the West this process must, apparently, still be experienced; but eventually, they will also become disappointed in Vygotsky.

Haenen & Galperin, 1989, p. 15

Regardless of whether Gal'perin's pessimistic prediction proves correct or not quite, it is already at this point clear that the archaic cultist standpoint is hardly productive. It is critical attitudes to Vygotsky's legacy – like that of the contributors to this book – that might bring us some understanding of its potential for contemporary practice and research in "scientific psychology" as a concrete, empirical science of the 21st century.

Questioning Vygotsky's Legacy (this very book) is a collection of papers, in which every chapter is unique and expresses the uniquely distinct and dissimilar voice of its authors united in a polyphonic dialogue about Vygotsky, his life and work. And still, the dialogue between the “archaists” and the “futurists” is not over yet. The future will show the outcome.

Note

- 1 For links to the data and discussion of the materials of the longitudinal study in progress see the sources online: <https://psyanimajournal.livejournal.com/16165.html>.

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