Cultural Psychology of Education

Volume 3

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Understanding Educational Psychology
A Late Vygotskian, Spinozist Approach
Vygotsky: The Question of Psychological Synthesis

There are three main reasons to be proud of hosting Roth and Jornet’s book, Understanding Educational Psychology: A Late Vygotskian, Spinozist Approach, in the Cultural Psychology of Education Books Series.

First of all, the intellectual depth of the book surpasses any existing education-oriented “Vygotsky-talking” book, particularly because of its connection with the semiotic approaches in contemporary cultural psychology.

Vygotsky’s theory has always been (and still is) a battleground of different interpretations for both theoretical side and practical application: from the sociocultural or cultural-historical activity theories to the Piagetian-social constructivist approaches of genetic social psychology and from the dialogic-symbolic resources approaches to the neo-Meadian approaches. After all, in the history of psychology, Vygotsky represents one among the giants on whose shoulders anybody jumps picking up pieces of his complex theoretical framework and using them as a self-explaining theoretical umbrella for making any sort of scientific claims. Very often one can read in academic papers sentences like “According to Vygotsky’s theory…” or “Following Vygotsky’s perspective …” as a façade of a scientific kind in the polyphony of the research’s supermarket (Tateo 2014).

Theories are mainly tools for thinking (Valsiner 2009) that any scholar should use for moving a step further toward a new knowledge construction. The way for reducing the heuristic power of a theoretical model is exactly to replicate or to recall it thousands of times without any additional elaboration. Moreover, Vygotsky was a developmental thinker in his essence (Valsiner and van der Veer 2014). As in the case of Jerome Bruner, to whom the previous book in the series was dedicated on the occasion of his centennial (Marsico 2015a), he would have appreciated to see where the others could further develop his ideas.

In the contemporary academic world, dominated by “ready-made recipes” for explaining psychological processes, Roth and Jornet instead took upon themselves the hard task of revising Vygotsky’s legacy on the basis of Spinoza’s relevance in...
his thinking. The authors focused on the Russian scholar’s “later years,” still almost unknown worldwide to both the large audience and serious specialists in educational psychology and adjacent areas. By discussing the main theoretical foundations of the Spinozist turn in the late Vygotsky, the authors provide the conceptual and empirical tools to understand the Vygotskian holistic approach to psychology that aimed at overcoming the contradictions (unfortunately still nowadays operating) in developmental and the educational psychology. Vygotsky tried indeed to tackle the dichotomies between body and mind, individual and social, cognitive and affective processes, and biology and culture for the sake of reaching a psychological synthesis, which was his main quest.

The book offers a new look at the whole Vygotskian legacy. In this respect, it greatly contributes to the consolidation of a cultural psychology perspective in education (which is the main goal of the book series) to restore the relevance of a general theoretical elaboration against the flattening of present-day educational psychology, basically conceived as an applied psychology. This is the second reason for being pleased of this volume.

Finally, this book nicely flows into the current attempt to establish the newly developed area of cultural psychology as the general science of specifically human ways of existence (Marsico 2015b; Valsiner et al. 2016). Vygotsky made an effort to develop a holistic approach to the human psyche, which is complex and cannot be explained by mere low-level casual mechanism. The question of the psychological synthesis was Vygotsky’s commitment. We should be, at least, equally engaged.

Aalborg, Denmark

Giuseppina Marsico

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References


Near the end of his life, Lev S. Vygotsky was beginning a radical rethinking of his theory. The new point of view that is apparent in his personal notes and that had made its mark in the literature only in some starting points (e.g., The Theories of Emotion) was a turn to Spinoza. Even his famous book on thinking and speech, often referred to as the pinnacle of his work, according to his own notes, was only a beginning that “stopped at the threshold” of the new theory he intended to develop (Vygotsky, in Zavershneva 2010a: 35). The writings of Spinoza were the inspiration for a new direction in psychology that would investigate “the changes in the proportionate role of the soul in the life of the body, and of the intellect in life” (Vygotsky, in Zavershneva 2010a: 39). This turn to Spinoza was to deal with an age-old problem in psychology that has never ceased to exist despite the eight decades that have passed since Vygotsky wrote this note. That is, in much of current educational psychology, there are unresolved contradictions that have their origin in the opposition between body and mind, individual and collective, and structure and process—including the different nature of intellect and affect or the difference between knowledge and its application.

Despite the increasing popularity of Vygotsky’s work in the educational and psychological literature, a theory that builds upon Vygotsky’s final insights and that overcomes all Cartesian dualisms in our understanding of human learning and thinking has yet to be created (Zavershneva 2010b). Many of the same contradictions that Vygotsky sought to overcome are repeated in contemporary constructivist approaches. These do not overcome dichotomies but rather exacerbate them by individualizing and intellectualizing our knowledgeable participation in the everyday world. Interestingly enough, Vygotsky, whom many use as a referent for making
arguments about inter- and intrasubjective “mental” “constructions,” was on the verge of developing a thoroughly monist approach. Grounded in the Ethics (Spinoza 2002), central to this approach was Spinoza’s dictum that there is only one substance. This one substance manifests itself in (exists as) two radically different ways: body (material, biology) and mind (society, culture). There are not two substances that are combined (synthesized) somehow into a unit: there is but one substance. Once such an approach is adopted, the classic questions posed by (a) cognitive scientists about how symbols are grounded in the world and (b) constructivist scholars about the relation between knowledge and the world can be recognized to be artifacts of theory. Symbols, just as knowledge, are not merely “about” the world but are of this world; they belong and form inherent part of it just as much as our bodies do because they are just one substance.

As a consequence of the Spinozist one-substance approach, human culture itself is taken as the result of natural processes (biology). Culture already existed as a subordinate function of life in the animal (proto-human) world. In and through a process following the law of the transformation of quantity into quality—culture became the dominant function in/of human life. There is therefore neither dichotomy of nature (biology) versus nurture (culture) nor parallelism of nature and nurture. Instead, there only is the cultural nature of human psychological characteristics. Both culture and nature are articulated and emphasized here as irredeemably aspects of anything that is specifically human.

The central contribution that distinguishes Vygotsky from all other psychologists is his emphasis on sociogenesis. Although “social constructivist” and “socio-cultural” scholars often refer to Vygotsky, the social in their work tends to be treated as constituting merely the external context of thinking and learning, not thinking and learning themselves—which has led Felix T. Mikhailov to assert that most Western scholars have fundamentally misunderstood Vygotsky. Thus, it is common to find in the literature on learning and education claims that groups of learners construct things or ideas intersubjectively, which they then internalize to become intrasubjective aspects of their thinking. What such accounts fail to address, however, is the non-dualist character of the late Vygotsky’s work, for example, when he notes that all higher functions are social relations before they show up as psychological characteristics. That is, whatever higher function we may attribute to a person, at some point in his/her life first was a relation with other people. As a consequence, this relation, which itself is thinking, can be studied anthropologically. The true sense of the term sociogenesis is precisely this: higher psychological functions originate as not merely in social relations, thereby generating both social facts and social persons. Spinoza’s thought (i.e., mind), then, exists in and as the “ensemble of societal relations,” which is precisely the phenomenon that distinguishes humans from other animals and constitutes the essence of the species (Marx and Engels 1978). There is only one approach that we are aware of where the primacy of the social exists in this way, and this approach is ethnomethodology (e.g., Livingston 2008). We have taken up the primacy of the social into our own work on concrete human psychology, the direction in which Vygotsky was heading but could only sketch in a fragmentary text of the same name.
The central purpose of this book is to work out where we are led when we take Vygotsky’s final notes as a starting point for developing theory. That is, this book neither is an attempt at working out what Vygotsky really wanted to say and write, nor is it an attempt at guessing the exact way in which he might have continued his work. Instead, ours is part of an effort to articulate an approach to a cultural psychology of education that has its basis in a Marxist re-reading of Spinoza—in the way Vygotsky envisions it in the second introductory quotation. We do not aim at finding out the/a proper reading of Vygotsky’s writing or at establishing what he really meant without saying so. Instead, we pursue a line of theory development that those thoughts that he stated near the end of his life afford and invite following. This educational psychology takes the primacy of the social as its fundamental principle and the actual, in vivo material processes of sociogenesis as its object of study. Both aspects are important if the goal of educational psychology is to understand learning and development of the individual.1

Many of the problems in the uptake of Vygotsky in the West have been generated in what insiders (e.g., M. Cole, A. Yasnitsky) note to be poor translations of Vygotsky’s works into English. For example, even though Vygotsky’s collaborator A. R. Luria insisted that the Russian adjective psixićeškij2 [psychical] should be translated as “psychological,” it appears, in most translations, as “mental.” When Vygotsky entitles one of his last works Historija razvitija vysšíx psixićeššíx funkçij, English translations tend to translate it as “The History of Higher Mental Functions” rather than “The History of Higher Psychological Functions,” a version that also would be more consistent with the German (Geschichte der höheren psychischen Funktionen), Italian (Storia dello sviluppo delle funzioni psichiche superiori), or French translations (Histoire du développement des fonctions psychiques supérieures). In such instances, therefore, English translations reflect a mentalism (intellectualism) in the Anglo-Saxon scholarship that is against the explicit warnings of Vygotsky, including the one against doing interpretive psychology. From Vygotsky’s monist perspective, the psyche is larger than the mental and conscious life—particularly apparent in his emphasis on the unity/identity of intellect and affect or in his insistence on the physical-material aspect of speech. In this book, we offer to overcome these problems by drawing on translations into other languages as well as on the originals and, as we have done over the past several years, by having verified translations with Russian-speaking staff at our university (including V. Atavina) and scholarly colleagues (including M. Cole, D. Bakhurst, J. Valsiner, and A. Yasnitsky). We sometimes quote from the English translation but insert translations of certain terms that are more consistent with translations into other languages together with the original language term. Thus, we might quote a text as “active [psychological (psixićeškie)] states” rather than using what certainly appears inappropriately in an English translation: “active mental states.”

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1 These are two radically different processes that are dialectically related and that are also poorly understood in the Western uptake of Vygotsky’s work.
2 We use the scholarly conventions for the Romanization of Russian terms (e.g., “Ч” as “č” rather than as “ch”).
We note above that this book does not offer yet another interpretation of Vygotsky’s published work. In fact, one Russian, dialectical materialist philosopher who has specialized in the late-Vygotskian works suggests that these “have been substantially distorted by commentators, disciples, and users to meet their own needs” (Mikhailov 2001: 11). Grounded in dialectical materialist thought, we are inclined to follow Mikhailov’s path by taking up the agenda of the late Vygotsky, who had turned to the philosopher Spinoza to develop a holistic approach to social psychology by “bringing Spinozism to life in Marxist psychology.” In addition to Mikhailov, we are inspired by the philosopher E. V. Il’enkov (1977), who provides a Marxist re-reading of Spinoza that appears to us consistent with the notes of the later Vygotsky. This approach no longer dichotomizes the body and mind, intellect and affect, or the individual and the social. We develop whatever Vygotsky has left, sometimes in fragmentary ways, and, in so doing, articulate an approach to cultural psychology of education that overcomes the dichotomies of other approaches that nevertheless lay claim to be working in the spirit of Vygotsky.

We develop a set of foundational concepts that are often discussed in terms of dichotomies in the constructivist and sociocultural literatures, including the dichotomies between nature and culture (nurture) or the conflation of thinking and speaking. Drawing from materials collected in a variety of concrete settings, we articulate how an approach that takes seriously the primacy of the social overcomes such dichotomies, offering research avenues yet unexplored in educational psychology. Unlike other textbooks where cultural psychology is restricted to (institutional) education, we further include a series of case studies in which core topics of a cultural psychology of education are examined as they play out in actual practices taking place across a diversity of (educational, everyday, work) settings and spanning the life trajectory from childhood to adulthood. The third part of this book offers implications for educational research and practice.

Victoria, BC, Canada
April 2016

Wolff-Michael Roth
Alfredo Jornet

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