

## 5 Society versus context in individual development: Does theory make a difference?

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### Introduction

In studying development of the child psyche, we must . . . start by analysing the development of the child's activity, as this activity is built up in the concrete conditions of its life. (Leont'ev, 1981, p. 395)

What is meant by the term *concrete conditions of life*? Activity theory answers in terms of the societal nature of the individual human being. Anglo-American contextualists have recently emphasized the *embeddedness* of the individual in the *sociocultural milieu* or *ecology* (e.g., Lerner, 1979; Jaeger & Rosnow, 1988; Dixon, Lerner, & Hultsch, 1991). Is there a theoretical convergence here, or do significant theoretical and methodological differences remain? This is the question I wish to address here.

### Activity theory on the societal nature of the individual

It is fundamental to activity theory that the relation of individuals to every aspect of the world around them is *essentially* societal. Conceptually, this idea can be traced to the fourth of Marx's *Thesen über Feuerbach* (1845/1968, pp. 339–341): "*In seiner Wirklichkeit ist [das menschliche Wesen] das Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse.*" I cite the original German statement here because the usual English translation (e.g., p. 14) can be confusing with respect to precisely the matter here at issue. The translation of *gesellschaftlich* as "social" does not fully capture the intended meaning. Animals often behave or are organized by their instinctive natures in such a way that can be called "social," and this is normally expressed in German by *sozial*. German usage distinguishes the way in which humans *organize themselves* socially by the adjective *gesellschaftlich*. The English translation as "social-historical" is an improvement over the mere "social," but "societal," derived from "society," just as *gesellschaftlich* is derived from *Gesellschaft* (as opposed to *Sozium*), is preferred.

This would count as mere pedantry were it not that it is exactly on the *societal* nature of the *human* individual, as distinct from the social, that activity theory insists. The theory is not referring merely to the social fact that individuals find themselves in relations with other people. In order to clarify this point, I describe, first, activity theory's conception of the societal nature of the functioning adult human being; second, the implications of this nature for the development of the individual personality; and, third, its methodological implications. By then contrasting these understandings with those of Anglo-American contextualism, I hope to make it clear that the activity approach represents an approach to both theory and practice that is fundamentally and significantly different from that of empiricist social science.

### The societal nature of adult activity

Activity theory elaborates Marx's understanding of the human essence as the ensemble of societal relations, but it must not be assumed that this excludes the natural-historical (and therefore social) foundations for these relations. As Messmann and Rückriem (1978) so clearly put it:

Das Wesen des Menschen ist aus seiner Wirklichkeit als Ensemble der gesellschaftlichen Verhältnisse *allein nicht* zu erklären. Für eine zureichende Erklärung muss vielmehr diese Wirklichkeit als Realisierung einer Möglichkeit, eines Vermögens, betrachtet werden, das den Menschen "von der Natur aus" qualifiziert, Produzent dieser Verhältnisse zu sein. (p. 80)

A detailed account of the natural history of human sociality was already assembled by Leont'ev (1959/1981; Leontjew, 1959/1975) and has since been elaborated and brought up-to-date by Schurig (1975a, 1975b, 1976) and Holzkamp (1973/1978, 1983). I shall not dwell on this here, but it must be recognized as assumed in the discussion that follows. Although the distinctness of human societal nature will be stressed, there is no entailment here of the mind-body dualism sometimes associated with the *Geisteswissenschaften*.

Human activity begins in the process that we know as *labor*. Marx gave labor its classic definition in *Capital*:

Labour is, in the first place, a process in which both man and Nature participate, and in which man of his own accord starts, regulates, and controls the material re-actions between himself and Nature. He opposes himself to Nature as one of her own forces, setting in motion arms and legs, head and hands, the natural forces of his body, in order to appropriate Nature's productions in a form adapted to his own wants. By thus acting on the external world and changing it, he at the same time changes his own nature. He develops his slumbering powers and compels them to act in obedience to his sway. We are

not now dealing with those primitive instinctive forms of labour that remind us of the mere animal. An immeasurable interval of time separates the state of things in which a man brings his labour-power to market for sale as a commodity, from that state in which human labour was still in its first instinctive stage. We presuppose labour in a form that stamps it as exclusively human. (1867/1954, pp. 173-174)

Tool use and tool making are often considered the defining features of labor, but although these may indeed be necessary to the process, they are not sufficient. Even when Marx was writing, instances of animals' using and even preparing tools were known. As he went on to emphasize, the crucial features are individual consciousness and the collectivity of the activity. Indeed, as Leont'ev compellingly argues (1959/1981, pp. 207ff.), it is precisely in the collective nature of labor that consciousness emerges in its distinctively human form. The two working together are clearly portrayed in Leont'ev's example of the beater participating in a primitive hunt in which it is his function to drive the quarry toward his companions, who are lying in wait to make the kill. The collective nature of the activity is manifested in a division of labor. No single individual carries out the activity required to satisfy his or her needs. Rather, the activity is divided into separate actions, each of which is then assumed by a particular individual in coordination with the others.

In our own society, the enormous complexity of the division of labor is patently obvious. We are psychologists, carpenters, computer analysts, or whatever. Each of us carries out only a very few of the sum total of actions required to maintain our own and our society's existence. I mow my own lawn, but I did not invent landscaping and I did not make my own mower. I may go into the mountains to show that I can "live off the land," but I will wear clothing made by others and take with me implements invented and produced by others. Even if I go naked and implementless, I go with knowledge given me by others. Survival in the strictest sense is impossible for individual members of our species on their absolute own.

Our societal nature is perhaps most importantly indicated by the knowledge that is accumulated by society in the course of its history and that we receive from others. The information required by individuals for functioning in society and for the survival of society itself is not carried in our biotic genes but in our societal institutions, most notably those associated with the educational function, such as schools, libraries, and other cultural forms.

This implies the importance of consciousness. In the example of the beater in the primitive hunt, it is already obvious that a degree of consciousness is required that is lacking in other animals, no matter how

complex their behavior patterns or social organizations. The beater who needs food for survival is engaged in actions that result in the opposite of what he is immediately seeking. Instead of closing the distance with the quarry, he is driving it away. This makes sense only if he knows that someone is waiting to achieve his goal (consciously shared with others) at the other end. The sense of his action lies not in the action itself but in his relation to other members of the group. As Leont'ev argues:

The separation of an action necessarily presupposes the possibility of the active subject's psychic reflection of the relation between the objective motive [getting food] and the object of the action [driving it away]. . . . [T]he beater's action is possible only on condition of his reflecting the link between the expected result of the action performed by him and the end result of the hunt as a whole. . . . (1959/1981, p. 212)

The emergence of action as a coordinated part of social activity performed by an individual must be accompanied by a shared meaning of the action that is reflected consciously by the actor. This is reflected in the fact (among others) that the roles of beater and bagger in the hunt are in principle interchangeable. The role of each participant must be decided beforehand. One participant may prove to be better in one role than another and the assignment of roles may come to appear fixed, but this does not affect the underlying interchangeability. Although the situation is immensely more complicated in our own society by the dependence of essential actions on training and education, the underlying principle remains the same.

Thus the necessary, conscious division of labor in human society is the most obvious indicator of the individual human's *societal* nature. The individual is truly human *only* in society. Indeed, a still stronger conclusion can be argued: that human individuality itself is achievable only in society. The *abstract* individual of bourgeois individualism is a figment of the ideological imagination.

### Implications for the development of individual personality

The societal nature of the human psychological process of development is evident from a consideration of the kinds of experience that a human child requires. Leont'ev distinguished two kinds of experience in animals:

- (a) that accumulated phylogenetically and reinforced by heredity; and (b) individual experience acquired during life. Two kinds of behaviour mechanism correspond to them. On the one hand there are hereditary mechanisms that are either already completely ready

for action at the moment of birth or that gradually mature during ontogenetic development; these mechanisms are formed in accordance with the general laws of biological evolution; it is a slow process corresponding to slow changes in the environment. In animals these mechanisms are of *fundamental* adaptive importance (1959/1981, p. 420)

The second kind of experience is one that evolves gradually and achieves a highly refined and effective state in "higher" animals. But this ability must be correctly understood:

The basic function performed in animals by the mechanisms of the forming of individual experience consists, moreover, in the *adaptation of species behaviour to variable elements of the environment*. Animals' ontogenetic development can hence be represented as the accumulation of individual experience mediating the performance of their instinctive activity progressively better in complex, dynamic, external conditions. (1959/1981, p. 420)

Although most Anglo-American theories of human psychological development take this kind of learning to be *the* ontogenetic task of the child, Leont'ev insists that this is not the case. Development cannot be fully understood in terms of the acquisition of adaptive behaviors. The task for the human child is different because the information required for human existence is different: it is *societal* information. This kind of information *cannot* be "learned" in the way that animals learn to adapt to the changing demands of their external worlds; it must be *appropriated*, reflecting an evolutionary new process linked to the new societal nature of the human species.

Leont'ev defines *appropriation* as "mastering . . . the experience accumulated by mankind in the course of social history" (1959/1981, p. 419). It is not reducible to biological adaptation or to any form of adaptive behavior, but supersedes adaptation as a specifically human mode of dealing with and living in the world. Unlike adaptation, appropriation "results in the individual's reproduction of historically formed human capacities and functions," and "the capacities and functions formed . . . in the course of this are psychological new formations" (Leont'ev, 1959/1981, p. 296). It is a developmental process in which the individual is drawn into societal practice; at the same time, it is a societal process by which new "psychological formations" are developed.

Consider a child learning to drive nails with a hammer. Is it merely learning responses? Is it merely learning to adapt to the demands of the wood, the nails, or the hammer? The child *is* learning responses and *is* learning to adapt to demands, but not *merely*. The hammer, like all objects made by human beings, from the simplest implements to the computer, embodies meaning, the accumulated historical experience of the society

into which the child is born, and it is this above all that the child is acquiring. It is the knowledge of making things and of the need to do so, of the utility of wood, of the functions of nails and hammers. The child is appropriating societal experience. And given that human society is characterized by a complex division of labor, the child is also acquiring the possibility of entering the productive life of society. At the same time, the child is being integrated into a process in which its own practice will create new ways of carpentering, thus altering the accumulated body of societal meanings that the succeeding generation will appropriate. None of this applies to the rat learning to press a lever in a Skinner box.

Consider one further aspect of learning to use a hammer. Can the child learn from the hammer itself, as animals learn directly from the demands of their environments? Is it the world of objects from which the child learns to speak a language, to read, and to develop other cognitive skills? Surely not! There is always another human being in the picture. It is a function of adults and older children to teach younger ones to do these things. This function becomes institutionalized in families, schools, and other cultural organizations precisely because the child cannot learn simply by interacting on its own with the world of objects.

It was this sort of thinking that was expressed in Vygotsky's term *zone of proximal development*. Too often, however, it has been interpreted simply as a way in which the teacher can aid the learning of a pupil. This completely misses its theoretical intent, which is to reveal the essentially societally mediated nature of human learning. Engeström comes closer to the mark when he describes this zone as the "distance between the everyday actions of individuals and the historically new form of the societal activity that can be collectively generated as a solution to the double bind potentially embedded in . . . everyday actions" (1987, p. 174).<sup>1</sup>

The conclusion, it appears to me, is inescapable: At its heart, human ontogeny is a uniquely human, societal process of appropriating historical experience in the form of actions and meanings.

### Methodological implications

The implications of what was said earlier can be roughly divided into two groups: formal and practical. The formal aspect can be approached by way of an observation Leont'ev made in connection with teaching arithmetic to children:

If the persons training a child primarily set themselves the goal of imparting knowledge of some sort or other and pay little attention to how the child itself goes about it, by what

operations it solves the school problems it has been set, and does not check whether a further transformation is taking place at the proper time in these operations, their development can be disturbed. (1959/1981, p. 432)

To discover "how the child itself goes about it" is to reveal the actual nature of the underlying process, which, for Leont'ev, was the aim of all social scientific investigation. The problem for us is to see what the method entails.

A first approximation to specifying the principles of an appropriate method was made by Vygotsky in 1930 (Vygotsky, 1978, chapter 5). It was expressed in three principles. The first was "analysing process, not objects." He wrote: "Any psychological process, whether the development of thought or voluntary behaviour, is a process undergoing changes right before our eyes" (p. 61). It was possible to "trace this development" by setting up situations that "provoke" it: "Our method may be called experimental-developmental in the sense that it artificially provokes or creates a process of psychological development" (p. 61). The aim was "a reconstruction of each stage in the development of the process" (p. 62). That this leads to experiments that look quite different from those that have become familiar in the Anglo-American tradition is evident from examples throughout the book. I shall return to this in a moment.

The second principle was "explanation versus description" (p. 62). It was explanation that Vygotsky was seeking, and here he turned to Kurt Lewin's distinction between *phenotype* and *genotype*, a recognition that underlying processes are not always evident from the surface appearance of actions. An example is the relation between overt speech and action in young children and adults, which appears to be the same in each case but is accounted for by quite distinct "causal dynamic bases."

The third principle was referred to as "the problem of 'fossilized behaviour'" (p. 63). Fully developed behavior patterns cannot be adequately understood from studying them in their developed forms. Vygotsky showed how this can be quite misleading. Only by looking at behavior "genetically," by observing its development, can one hope to reveal its underlying dynamics.

It remained, however, for Evald Il'enkov, a philosopher, to articulate the methodology in more generalized terms (e.g., Il'enkov, 1960/1982). He expressed the general unifying methodological principle as that of the "ascent from the abstract to the concrete," which requires a particular understanding of *abstract* and *concrete*. To say that all things are concrete does not mean merely that they are things as opposed to ideas, but also that they are integral wholes within a larger system that also forms an integral whole. Things represent a "unity in diversity." *Abstract*, by

contrast, refers to the stripping of these relations, either objectively or in thought. The goal of scientific theory is the "reproduction of the concrete in thought" (Il'enkov, 1960/1982, p. 102).

The methodological "ascent from the abstract to the concrete" is a complex notion that we cannot hope to capture fully here. I am concerned only with revealing enough to highlight its contrast with standard Anglo-American empiricist methodology. Suppose we find, as in Leont'ev's example, that school children in some classes, though apparently competent in elementary arithmetic, are having difficulty mastering more advanced arithmetic skills. We note that this problem seems to be distributed not individually but by classes, and therefore we suspect that something the teachers are doing is responsible. Somehow we hit on the hypothesis that the teachers' attitudes are important. We divide the teachers into two groups, designated as "lenient" and "strict" (independent variable). The performance of the pupils (dependent variable) is then measured, and we discover a statistically significant correlation accounting for more than, say, 60% of the variance. We conclude that leniency accounts for the poorer skills.

Although this procedure describes a typical investigation in the Anglo-American tradition, from Il'enkov's, Vygotsky's, and Leont'ev's point of view, it is headed in the wrong direction. We started, as is necessarily the case, with an abstraction, a phenotype, of the children's performance on arithmetic problems. Instead of seeking the underlying genetic, dynamic process that caused this performance ("how the child itself goes about it"), we linked it statistically to another abstraction, teachers' leniency. We imagined ourselves to have made some kind of vital discovery by identifying the degree of correlation, whereas in fact we merely created a higher-order abstraction by showing how the relation between the two original abstractions can be generalized. We may repeat the investigation innumerable times, finding no exceptions, even approaching the ideal of universality. Yet we will not come a millimeter closer to understanding what is actually going on. This requires a genetic reconstruction of the concrete, causal dynamic process. The abstractions must be made concrete by finding their real connections within the concrete, integral whole of learning/teaching within the societal process.

How is this done? What rules of procedure will lead us to the truly concrete knowledge of a process? Certainly, one of the most seductive features of the empiricist methodology that purports to construct theoretical knowledge out of the correlations of arbitrarily selected variables is that it is readily reduced to rules of procedure, the basic mastery of which can be achieved by university undergraduates. By contrast, the

“Leont’evian” must take a more difficult route. The principles of the methodology (as distinct from methods and procedures) must be mastered. These cannot be translated into appropriate procedures without experience, intuition, and intelligence, coupled with a sound theoretical understanding of the phenomenon under study. In short, there are no rules. The very idea of a fixed set of abstract rules violates the concrete conception of the problem.<sup>2</sup>

The literature of activity theory is replete with examples of concrete research. They reveal three determinants: (1) an existing theoretical understanding of the general process; (2) a focus on the concrete nature of the immediate problem; and (3) an aim of revealing underlying causal dynamics. In a report of research on the development of the learning motive in children, Leont’ev (Leontjew, 1959/1975, pp. 344–355; an article omitted from the English edition) gave a very detailed account of how the play motive is transformed into the learning motive during the preschool and early school years. The work depended on (1) a general understanding of the societal structure of activity and its motivation, and of the senses and meanings that goals and motives have for individual children; (2) a clear specification of what was involved in children’s learning in school; and (3) information gained from casual conversations with the children, as well as from observing their participation in organized games and their reactions to irregularities in school routine. In some instances, dependent and independent variables are identifiable *after the fact*, but it is clear that Leont’ev was not thinking in those terms. Large samples and measurement played a role in the studies, but there is no indication that statistical analyses were ever used or needed.

In contrasting the methodology and experimental procedures of activity theory with those of Anglo-American empiricist psychology, we continually encounter the problem of *variables*. If there is a single diagnostic feature of the two methodologies, it is the utter indifference of activity theory to variables, in contrast to empiricist methodology’s insistence and dependence on them. It is useful to remind ourselves here that the critique of the analysis of variables has not gone unvoiced within American social science. A well-known instance is that of Herbert Blumer’s presidential address before the American Sociological Society in 1956 (Blumer, 1969, pp. 127–139). Blumer identified three “shortcomings” of variable analysis: (1) “there seems to be little limit to what may be chosen or designated as a variable” (anything measurable will do); (2) many variables claim to be generic but are demonstrably not (measures of “integration” in fact measure different things in different cases

but create the illusion that there is something generic called *integration*); and (3) some variables represent characteristics that are in fact generic, like “age,” but then serve to overlook how age may be different in different societies and at different historical times. Blumer was obviously alarmed by the abstractness being imported into social science by the variable concept.

### The “contextualist” approach to individual development

The *contextualist* approach to human development is a good foil for activity theory because (1) it is a fair representative of Anglo-American empiricist positions and (2) it claims more than most to accomplish the goals I have identified with activity theory. It self-consciously seeks to overcome the limitations of both mechanism (e.g., behaviorism) and organicism (e.g., Piaget) and avows a *dialectical* view of psychological process that integrates the individual into the social milieu (e.g., Lerner, 1979, p. 272). It is a position, therefore, that can lead one to believe that activity theory is not really different from what has been proposed in American psychology.

The key to any distinction lies in how the individual–society relationship and the role of that relationship in the development of the individual personality are understood.

### Individual and society in contextualism

Richard Lerner (1979) leads into his discussion of social relations by outlining the contextualist view of individual–environment relationships generally. Here he speaks of “direct exchanges,” “reciprocal outcomes,” “reciprocities,” “interdependent relations,” and “congruity” (p. 275). He states that there is a “continuous interdependency of organism and environmental processes” (p. 276). There is a “dialectical intermeshing” of the two that is conditioned by the organism’s biological maturation and experience, with each being interdependent with the other (pp. 275–276). Lerner stresses the reciprocity of this process:

As each person’s maturation–experience interactions intermesh to provide a distinct individual, this individual concomitantly interacts differently with his or her environment as a consequence of this individuality. In turn, these new interactions are a component of the individual’s further experience, and thus serve to further promote his or her individuality. (p. 278)

It appears that the “organism–organism” or social relationship is merely a variant of the organism–environment relationship. Lerner’s

language here, however, becomes a bit stronger. The relationship is not just reciprocal but "circular" (p. 279). But social relationships appear to be not the only "circular" ones:

Although organism interactions with animate and non-conspecific organisms certainly exist, and at least for the latter type of interactions circular functions are also certainly involved, the conspecific organism-organism interaction - the social relation - has been used to exemplify the nature of circular functions. (p. 280)

This exemplification, Lerner asserts, is based on the fact that "development by its very nature is basically a social relation phenomenon" (p. 280). He goes on to say that, despite their being a mere form of nonsocial reciprocities, social relations are "particular" because they "invariably involve processes of reciprocal stimulation and hence interdependent influencing" and because "they involve relations with stimuli on the basis of stimulus association value or meaning, rather than merely on the basis of stimuli's immediate physiological import" (p. 280).

Lerner proceeds to a discussion of the "sociocultural-historical" context in which the dependence of the social relation on the "sociocultural milieu of the relation" (p. 281) is stressed:

Parents in one setting may be more or less permissive than parents in another. Furthermore, the sociocultural milieu also influences the physical setting of any social interaction, and it may be expected that in physical environmental situations varying in such socioculturally related variables as noise level, pollution level, housing conditions, crowding, and recreational facilities, the quality and timing of person-person exchanges will show variation and provide differential feedback to all involved individuals. (p. 281)

As might be expected, history is treated the same way: It is simply a contextual milieu that changes with time. Lerner's example is the influence of the advent of television.

Two interrelated conclusions appear to be warranted. First, this understanding of the individual-society relationship is not the same as that found in activity theory. Rather than being characterized by the internal and necessary relationship between the two, contextualism confines itself to external and contingent relations that are not essentially, or even qualitatively, different from any other kind of relations.<sup>3</sup>

Second, despite the claims of Lerner and other contextualists, their position does not differ essentially from that of mechanistic behaviorists. Except for its "dialectical" posturing, Lerner's account is much like that of Skinner (1953, esp. chapter 19). Even the account of *meaning* in terms of association is the same. In both contextualist and behaviorist positions, the individual is treated as preexisting, coming to society to be further shaped by external influences encountered there. The essentially societal individual of activity theory is absent.

### The contextualist account of individual development

Given the mechanistic understanding of social relations, it comes as no surprise that development is similarly understood:

From this [contextualist] perspective, developmental changes occur as a consequence of reciprocal (bidirectional) relations between the active organism and the active context. Just as the context changes the individual, the individual changes the context. (Lerner, Hultsch, & Dixon, 1983, p. 103)

It is diagnostic here that contextualists recognize only two types of process in development: biological maturation and experience, with the latter understood exclusively in terms of response acquisition. A key to the distinctive nature of Leont'ev's theory, one that followed from his understanding of the internal and essential connection between individual and society, was the recognition of a third process, namely, appropriation. This or anything comparable is lacking in the contextualist account.

Indeed, to the extent that the contrast of appropriation and adaptation as central moments of ontogenetic development is diagnostic, it is informative to note that much of Lerner's recent empirical research on child development has been guided by what he calls the *goodness-of-fit* model.

The studies we have conducted in our laboratory have focused on how the demands regarding characteristics of behavioral or physical individuality (e.g., temperament or physical attractiveness, respectively) held by a child's or an adolescent's parents, teachers, or peers are associated with different levels of adaptation, or adjustment, among children with various repertoires of temperamental individuality or characteristics of physical attractiveness. . . . [T]his notion is termed the *goodness-of-fit* model. (Lerner & Tubman, 1991, p. 198)

In short, goodness-of-fit, as the name applies, is little more than an elaborated version of complexified adaptation. An examination of the original reports again reveals nothing resembling the process of appropriation.

### Contextualism and variable analysis

Contextualists claim that their position represents the "emergence" of a "major organizational philosophy" (Lerner et al., 1983, p. 101). It is hailed as a "new model," a "new view of reality," with "different assumptions about human nature" (Lerner, 1979, p. 274). Clearly, this is vastly overstated, and it is significant that of the two "paradigms" against which contextualists contrast their own position, it is not the organismic one of Piaget's to which they remain tied but the still more empiricistic, mechanistic one.<sup>4</sup> Piaget was at least attempting to discover the nature of

the developmental *process*, not only the effects of external influence. He also did not speak in terms of variables.

Contextualism remains captive to the variable conception and analysis of its subject matter. Consider, for instance, the claim that

the phenomena that characterize developmental change arise from a dynamic interaction between nature variables, such as maturation, and nurture variables, such as experience. The contribution of each source of development is influenced by the quality and timing of the other. . . . (Lerner, 1979, p. 274)

Given that the "source of development" is a set of variables that is distinguished only by the fact that it is more complex than that ordinarily recognized by psychologists, the methodological implications contextualists draw from their philosophy pertain to the elaboration of standard variable analysis:

[I]n order to study the complex interrelations among organism and context life-span developmentalists [contextualists] promote the use of particular research designs and methodologies [sic] (e.g., sequential designs, multivariate statistics, cohort analysis). (Lerner et al., 1983, p. 105)

Lerner uses a diagram to illustrate the contextualist model (1979, p. 277). It consists of an outer ring labeled "history" and one inside that is labeled "sociocultural milieu," inside of which are the "extraorganism environmental influences," within which are located smaller circles, one labeled "target organism" and three labeled simply "organism." Double-headed arrows denoting interactions connect all components of the diagram. Professor Lerner displayed this diagram as part of a lecture at the University of Victoria a couple of years ago. After pointing out all the possible interactions, he sought to relieve those dismayed by the diagram's apparent complexity by granting that all of these relationships cannot be studied at once; the approved strategy was to pick one or two at a time, holding the others constant.<sup>5</sup>

But for the individual, the "historical-sociocultural milieu," that is, "society," is not a set of variables that can be subtracted from the focus of concern by being held constant. The individual *is* society manifested in a single organism. And its nature is not that of variables but of process!

### Conclusions

If *context* is a collection of variables that influence the already existing individual, then it cannot be identical to society. Also, therefore, activity theory and contextualism are not saying the same thing with different words. They are fundamentally different theories because they are

based on fundamentally different philosophies: Activity theory is a consequence of classical German philosophy; contextualism is one of the many natural offspring of British empiricism. As a result, their methodologies are distinct, yielding different methods and procedures. They also yield different kinds of knowledge: one of underlying processual dynamics, the other of external correlations among variables.

Danziger (1991) has demonstrated that the Anglo-American preoccupation with measurement and prediction based on the statistical analysis of variables arose in response to the needs of educational administrators to order pupils within the statistical aggregate (p. 79 and chapter 7). He writes:

By contrast, the main consumers of educational psychological research in Germany appear at first to have been classroom teachers. . . . Unlike administrators, classroom teachers were directly concerned with psychological processes in the minds of individual children and therefore had an interest in psychological research conducted on that basis. (1991, p. 131)

Indeed, as Leont'ev, an inheritor of the German tradition, reminded us, if we are truly concerned with imparting knowledge but "pay little attention to how the child itself goes about it," that child's "development can be disturbed" (Leont'ev, 1959/1981, p. 432). In the real promotion of children's development – as opposed to merely sorting them out – *theory does make a difference*, and when it comes to the choice between activity theory and contextualism (or any other popular Anglo-American form of empiricism), these differences will repay careful attention.

### Notes

1. In a book remarkable for its clarity and concreteness, Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) have elaborated a theory of appropriation (though they do not call it that) in a manner that is in keeping with the societal and historical spirit of Leont'ev's activity theory (and that in significant ways may surpass it). They speak of "situated learning" as the "legitimate peripheral participation" of individuals, both children and adults, in "communities of practice." I cannot describe these ideas here; readers sympathetic to the distinction I am trying to make in this chapter between societal and nonsocietal conceptions of psychological functioning are urged to consult this book for a lucid, positive example of the former.  
Other examples of what I call the *societal conception of context* are found in the works of some of the recent social constructionists, notably John Shotter (1993), and of ethno-linguists such as Duranti and Goodwin (1992; especially the excellent introductory chapter by the editors). It is interesting to note the influence of Vygotsky in all these recent societal or cultural treatments of context.
2. Aside from the work of Il'enkov that I have cited, an excellent, brief discussion in concrete psychological terms – though in the somewhat modified terminology of substantial versus empirical generalization – can be found in a paper by Davydov (1984).

- A very useful summary of Il'enkov's thinking on the subject is contained in a recent book by Bakhurst (1991, chapter 5). Both of these sources are highly recommended.
- The undifferentiated emphasis on relations to context has been extended by some contextualists to the object of knowledge, and from there to *truth*, yielding – understandably – a straightforward epistemological relativism (Rosnow & Georgoudi, 1986, chapter 1). This is usually accompanied by a hostility to the kind of realism that forms a necessary part of activity theory.
  - Lerner and his associates appear more recently to have adopted a softer stand on their differences with mechanism. They now see contextualism as one of a “pluralism” of positions that can be ranged on various dimensions between mechanism and organicism, but always falling closer to the former than to the latter (Dixon et al., 1991, esp. Fig. 2, p. 291).
  - There is ample evidence in the literature that Lerner and his associates are not alone in understanding context as an independent variable. A chapter on “assessing the family context” by Carlson (1990) is particularly instructive. Despite a nominal commitment to what some regard as the relatively more liberated positions of ecological psychology and systems theory, the author presses on to identify the “two basic decisions” involved in assessing the context as “choosing which aspects of the family [variables – CT] to measure and selecting a satisfactory method of measurement” (p. 551). The earlier and more classical ecological/systems statement on context by Bronfenbrenner (1977), despite its distinctly positive contribution, had also failed to free itself from the conception of reality as a collection of variables.

A recent book, *Context and Development*, edited by Cohen and Siegel (1991), is especially interesting in connection with the problem of variables. The book consists of 13 chapters contributed by 17 authors. Although it contains the chapter by Lerner and Tubman referred to earlier, it is evident that many of the remaining 15 authors are striving – with varying degrees of success – to free themselves from the constraints of conventional methods. Although this indicates a recognition that conventional methods are obstructing a more adequate understanding of context, there is little evidence of recognition that the problem may lie in the entailed conception of the subject matter in terms of variables.

One must be encouraged, however, by the editors' concluding observations that “contexts are more than just environments” (p. 308); that “contexts can neither be defined nor understood independent of the people who create them and inhabit them” (p. 309); that “contexts are essentially social” (p. 309); and that “context is not additive” (p. 310). In their introduction, however, the editors share with readers their enthusiasm that “many social scientists are turning toward explanations that embrace the examination of contextual variables” (p. 4). To be fair, it must be acknowledged that the editors go on, in the same paragraph, to suggest that there may be something more than this in context. Without an explicit treatment of the problem, however, it remains only a promise; but it is promising.

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## 6 Cultural psychology: Some general principles and a concrete example

Michael Cole

### Introduction

In an earlier paper, I discussed the uses of cross-cultural research by the originators of the Soviet cultural-historical school. My focus was on the ways in which their ideas intersect with certain streams of American cross-cultural research (Cole, 1988).<sup>1</sup> In that paper I argued that continued progress in developing the ideas of the cultural-historical school would be well served by combining their emphasis on the mediated structure of higher psychological functions and historically evolving modes of activity with the American approach emphasizing the importance of cultural context and empirical methods that begins with an analysis of concrete activity systems.

In this chapter, I begin where my previous discussion left off by presenting various contributions to the elaboration of a cultural theory of human nature that have come to prominence in the past decade under the rubric of *cultural psychology*.<sup>2</sup> After suggesting some ways in which these efforts complement the basic program of cultural-historical psychologists and their successors who work within the framework of activity theory, I present an example of research designed to apply the overall framework to a concrete problem of development in modern industrial societies.

### Recent proposals for cultural psychology

Approximately a decade ago, Douglas Price-Williams (1979, 1980), a well-known cross-cultural developmental psychologist, published two papers suggesting that psychologists recognize the existence of *cultural psychology*, which he defined as “that branch of inquiry that delves into the contextual behavior of psychological processes” (1979, p. 14). In addition to urging that the category of culture be made the centerpiece of such a discipline, Price-Williams pointed to the great relevance of closely