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Vygotsky's Theory of Creativity

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ABSTRACT: In *Educational Psychology (1997/1926)*, Vygotsky pleaded for a realistic approach to children's literature. He is, among other things, critical of Chukovsky's story "Crocodile" and maintains that this story deals with nonsense and gibberish, without social relevance. This approach Vygotsky would leave soon, and, in *Psychology of Art (1971/1925)*, in which he develops his theory of art, he talks about connections between nursery rhymes and children's play, exactly as the story of Chukovsky had done with the following argument: By dragging a child into a topsy-turvy world, we help his intellect work and his perception of reality. In his book *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood (1995/1930)*, Vygotsky goes further and develops his theory of creativity. The book describes how Vygotsky regards the creative process of the human consciousness, the link between emotion and thought, and the role of the imagination. To Vygotsky, this brings to the fore the issue of the link between reality and imagination, and he discusses the issue of reproduction and creativity, both of which relate to the entire scope of human activity. Interpretations of Vygotsky in the 1990s have stressed the role of literature and the development of a cultural approach to psychology and education. It has been overlooked that Vygotsky started his career with work on the psychology of art.

In this article, I want to describe Vygotsky's theory of creativity and how he developed it. He started with a realistic approach to imagination, and he ended with a dialectical attitude to imagination.

Criticism of Chukovsky's "Crocodile"

In 1928, the "Crocodile" story was forbidden. It was written by Korney Chukovsky (1882–1969). In his

book *From Two to Five Years*, there is a chapter with the title "Struggle for the Fairy-Tale," in which he attacks his antagonists, the pedologists, whom he described as a miserable group of theoreticians who studied children's reading and maintained that the children of the proletarians needed neither "fairy-tales nor toys, or songs" (Chukovsky, 1975, p. 129). He describes how the pedologists let the word *imagination* become an abuse and how several stories were forbidden, for example, "Crocodile." One of the slogans of the antagonists of fantasy literature was *chukovskies*, a term meaning of anthropomorphism and being bourgeois.

In 1928, Krupskaja criticized Chukovsky, the same year as Stalin was in power. Krupskaja maintained that the content of children's literature ought to be concrete and realistic to inspire the children to be conscious communists. As an atheist, she was against everything that smelled of mysticism and religion. She pointed out, in an article in *Pravda*, that "Crocodile" did not live up to the demands that one could make on children's literature. Many authors, however, came to Chukovsky's defense, among them A. Tolstoy (Chukovsky, 1975).

Ten years earlier in 1918, only a few months after the October Revolution, the first demands were made that children's literature should be put in the service of communist ideology. It was necessary to replace old bourgeois books, and new writers were needed. In the first attempts to create a new children's literature, a significant role was played by Maksim Gorky. His ideal was realistic literature with such moral ideals as heroism and optimism.

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Not until 1953 did Chukovsky get acknowledgment as the greatest name in Russian children's literature. Humor and playfulness were reestablished (Hellman, 1991).

Vygotsky's Attitude to Fairy Tale and Morality

Vygotsky's (1997/1926) criticism against "Crocodile" reminds one of Krupskaja's criticism. Children's literature often has the aim of giving the children bourgeois morality, and the writers do not believe that children understand reality. Vygotsky did not like bourgeois morality and the opinion that the child is primitive and constituted an abbreviated and compressed history of the species, according to the biogenetic law by Haeckel (Vygotsky, 1997/1926). He thought that Chukovsky's stories dealt with nonsense and gibberish without aesthetic quality and social relevance. Vygotsky maintained that art has an important role in education, not as morality, but as an introduction of aesthetic reactions into life itself.

The fairy tale and art in itself are related to reality in one important aspect: the emotional reality of imagination. The emotions associated with this influence, which we feel, are always real. The relation between art and emotion is not an original thought but is most interesting because Vygotsky links the emotions to thought. Then the aesthetics get a new role in the process of consciousness.

The Psychology of Art

Vygotsky began to write *The Psychology of Art* during his Gomel period (Veresov, 1998). The study was completed in the end of 1924 or beginning of 1925, when Vygotsky had moved to Moscow. Shakespeare became the focus of Vygotsky's interest in his years at the classical school long before he started to write *The Psychology of Art*, and he did several interpretations of the drama of *Hamlet*. One of these is included in *The Psychology of Art*.

The starting point of Vygotsky's analysis of *Hamlet* is that every work of art is based on contradictory development trends. The resulting tension is the cause of our aesthetic reactions. *Hamlet* contains three contradictory trends. The first is the actual story about Hamlet, the

second is the intrigue, and the third is the dramatic characters. The contradiction that causes Hamlet not to act in accordance with external logic makes the drama develop on a psychological level and gives it a dynamic and an aesthetic form. In this way it touches upon our emotions.

Criticism of a Reductionist Approach to Art

Vygotsky's theory of art is an attempt to develop a dynamic overall approach by way of relating (a) the writer's intentions, era, and background; (b) the form, content, and symbolism of the literary piece; and (c) the readers' experience and interpretation of the work, all to one another, and including this in the analysis. According to Vygotsky, all these aspects are important if we are to understand the role art plays in our lives. His aim was to develop an objective/analytical method "from the form of the work of art, via the functional analysis of its elements and structure, [to] recreate the aesthetic reaction and establish its general laws" (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 24). This overall approach shows that Vygotsky was polemicizing against the dominating theories of art of that time, theories he regarded as reductive.

Art as Theory of Society

Vygotsky was primarily critical of an idealistic approach to art, which regards art as something spiritual and metaphysical, and which raises the author's genius above the shape and content of his work. Instead, Vygotsky claimed, art reflects the development of society and touches upon people's social lives. With this, he joined one of the leading Marxist literary historians of the times, Plechanov, in his ideas about how social consciousness is dependent upon the social "being" (political and economic foundations) and about the ideological role of literature (Aspelin, 1970). At the same time, Vygotsky reacted against a mechanical theory of reflection, which reduces art to any old ideology and limits the aesthetic theory to sociological connections between art and social phenomena.

According to Vygotsky's thesis, human consciousness interprets art. Vygotsky maintained that no sociological theory can explain the origin of ideology because human consciousness is the origin of ideology. Consequently, an aesthetic theory of consciousness

ought to be a psychological theory of consciousness, which gives consciousness a social dimension by interpreting art and culture. Humanity takes part in cultural methods and traditions that develop through history, but through individual artists and authors. Human's social dimension does not mean that we all have similar notions, but rather that certain notions unite us. Our notions are unique to both the individual and something that we share with others.

Art as Theory of Emotion

The psychoanalytical theory of art concerns unconscious emotions (Freud, 1955). Vygotsky stated that art affects people's emotions. What he was really referring to was the unconscious. For this reason, Vygotsky welcomed the psychoanalytical approach that art is a social release of the unconscious, or a liberation of emotions. He also supported the theory of catharsis, stating that people are liberated through an explosion of emotions, which makes the imagination flourish as it interprets these emotions. The imagination is the central expression of an emotional reaction. Aesthetics is a matter of delayed action. This can also be found in children's play. Children are able to control their actions and movements—an aesthetic reaction—which enhance the experience and intensity of the action. Children liberate their emotions through their imagination. Thus, they create their own interpretation of what they have experienced, in a way similar to when an author creates his work and a reader creates his interpretation of the work.

However, Vygotsky was also critical of individual psychological interpretations presented in psychoanalysis of art as nothing but an expression for conflicts between the principles of desire and reality, and of Freud's statement that the unconscious is primarily a matter of sexual urges.

It appears, furthermore, that every person is inexorably chained to his Oedipus complex, and that in the most complicated and highest forms of our activity we are forced, again and again, to relive our childhood, so that even the most exalted forms of activity or creativity turn out to be connected with the remote past. Man emerges as the slave of his early childhood (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 81).

Why does consciousness have to be "an impotent tool in the hands of the subconscious," Vygotsky (1971, p. 81) asked, when it is our consciousness that interprets our subconscious emotions.

Consequently, Vygotsky was not satisfied with analyzing unconscious emotions. Dreams and neuroses cannot be described as art: Artistic expressions such as symbolism and meaning also have to be taken into account, and a sociopsychological and historical interpretation of artistic symbolism has to be made. Actually, Jung (2001) was closer to Vygotsky's approach when, in his criticism of Freud, he interpreted the symbolic value of art. Jung's idea of collective symbolism, however, remains a completely nonhistorical idea.

Art as Theory of Aesthetic Form

The starting point of Vygotsky's objective analysis is the literary work (or the work of art). The aesthetic form of this work provides the key to the artist's intentions, background, and ability, as well as to its own symbolism. People's experience of the work of art is explained by its dialectic form and structure. With this view, Vygotsky was critical of the practice of reducing our experience of art to simple characteristics such as color, shape, and rhythm. Nor was he satisfied with an introspective description of the same experience.

Vygotsky's interest in the dynamic aesthetic form of a work of art was directly influenced by the Russian formalists, a literary and linguistic movement that was active for a short period of time (1915–1930; Aspelin & Lundberg, 1971), before it was banned. However, their line of thought was included and developed in the structuralist movement (e.g., the Prague structuralist circle in the 1930s with Roman Jakobson as its most well-known representative).

Formalism developed as a reaction to the crisis in the field of literary history in Russia (Aspelin & Lundberg, 1971). The critics rejected the fact that everything was being debated apart from literature itself. To a great degree, the interest in structuralism came from art and literature, symbolism at the turn of the century, cubism, and futuristic experiments. Some of the most important questions were: What makes literature literature? What does the artistic process look like? and How does the working material assume the shape of art? *Device* is a formalist key word, which, among other things, includes the structural plan of a narrative (the plot). It was introduced by A. Veselovsky, one of the people who influenced Vygotsky's analysis. In the West, the fairy-tale morphology developed by Propp is better known and has been very influential. Similarly, A. Belyj's analyses

of poetry, in which he presents rhythm as the most important aesthetic form, created by the contrast between words and meter, also inspired Vygotsky.

One of the most important formalist aspects is that of *defamiliarization*, presented by Sklovsky, among others (cf. Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*). The task of art was to create a distance, enhance the sensitivity, and replace the perception of life. This also included the interest in absurdities, nonsense, and parody. These are lines of argument that Vygotsky attributed to children's play. Here you may notice that Vygotsky has left his one-sided attitude of a social-realistic ideology of art and shows that there is a dialectical relation between imagination and reality. He agreed with Chukovsky's opinion that imagination enhances the child's perception of reality. Vygotsky widened his mind toward the relation between play and art, and in *The Psychology of Art* (1971) he said, "Only recently was it noticed that certain absurdities or amusing nonsense which can be found in nursery rhymes by inverting the most commonplace events play a tremendously important role in child art" (p. 258).

According to Vygotsky, one of the most important aspects of art—the absurdities, nonsense, inversions—are very close to children's play. This explains why art is such an important ingredient in children's life. The contrasts give life to reality, and the dialectic in art creates both discrepancies between, and order among, objects. This approach matches that of Chukovsky, who calls for imaginative literature for children, which allows reasonable absurdities and topsy-turviness to break up the established order.

However, Vygotsky is also critical of the formalists, when formalism is taken too far. Vygotsky's criticism of the formalists was an issue that, to a great degree, affected the movement.

Vygotsky's Theory of Art and Creativity

Vygotsky regarded the psychology of art as a theory of the social techniques of emotion. His analysis reflects the artistic process. When the artist creates his art, he gives realistic material an aesthetic form, which touches upon the emotions of the readers and makes them interpret the work of art and bring it to life by using their imagination. "Initially, an emotion is individual, and only by means of a work of art does it become

social or generalised," Vygotsky wrote (1971, p. 243). This is how we become part of culture. We are being provided with cultural methods. An artist works with forms and techniques that have been developed historically and "turned into" art.

The connection between art and life is a complex one, according to Vygotsky. But, essentially, the aesthetic emotion, brought about by art, creates new and complex actions depending on the aesthetic form of the work of art. A military march may only trigger rhythmic marching, whereas a complex sonata by Beethoven will cause contradictory reactions thereby creating new reactions within the listener, a vague but great feeling of wanting to act and react: It opens the door on hidden powers.

Compared to other emotional reactions, aesthetic emotion results in delayed action. Vygotsky saw nothing strange in this. It is essential that the aesthetic emotion, brought about by art, creates new and complex actions depending on the aesthetic form of the work of art. Art simply has the power to influence people in the long run. It also has a pedagogical potential. Vygotsky found it important to point out that the emotion is interpreted by our consciousness (through our imagination). Thus, Vygotsky concluded at an early stage in his book *The Psychology of Art* that our consciousness is the unit which links emotion with meaning.

Art is the antithesis of everyday life and the opposite of morality. Art releases aspects that are not expressed in everyday life, and it is an important tool in the struggle for human existence (Vygotsky, 1971, p. 244). Vygotsky (1971) regarded the aesthetic emotion as the be-all and end-all of the future of humanity. Vygotsky said that art enables us to experience things that we would never otherwise experience: "Art is the organisation of our future behaviour" (p. 253) "Without new art there can be no new man" (p. 259).

According to its preface, *The Psychology of Art* should not be regarded as a finished theory. It is obvious that the aesthetic theory is pointing in the direction of a uniform, cultural-historical theory of consciousness with its basic ingredients: the dynamic form of consciousness (like that of the work of art), the social role or dialogicality, consciousness and the relation between thought and emotion, and the role of signs in the process of consciousness.

In 1930, Vygotsky published a book titled *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood* (1995). There, he

developed his view on the creative consciousness process, the relation between emotion and thought, and the role of imagination. Vygotsky discussed the issue of reproduction and creativity, two aspects that relate to the entire scope of human activity. Compared to many other theories on creativity, Vygotsky claimed that all human beings, even small children, are creative and that creativity is the foundation for art as well as for science and technology. This creative ability Vygotsky (1995) called *imagination*. Imagination is the basis of every creative action: "It manifests itself in all... aspects of our cultural life, making artistic, scientific and technical creativity possible" (p. 13). Reproduction, on the other hand, means that we repeat certain behavioral patterns that were created and shaped much earlier. Reproduction, Vygotsky said, is closely linked to memory.

If human activity would be limited to reproduce the past, man would be a creature totally focused on the past, only capable of adjusting to the future if this was a reproduction of the past. Creative activity is thus what makes man a creature focused on the future, capable of shaping it and changing his current situation. (p. 13).

Creativity is essential to the existence of humanity and society, Vygotsky wrote, and it is not only a question of artistic creativity, but also something that is necessary for our process of consciousness.

Imagination and Reality

According to Vygotsky, there is no opposition between imagination and reality. Imagination is a form of consciousness—an ability to combine—which is connected with reality in more ways than one. Imagination is based on elements taken from reality, which means that "the creative activity is directly dependent upon the individual's experiences, and the extent and degree of variation of these experiences.... This is why the imagination of the child is poorer than that of an adult, because of their differences in experience" (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 19). Emotion and imagination are closely related, Vygotsky wrote. Emotions result in an imaginary process, and vice versa. Emotions are always real and true. In this way, Vygotsky claimed, emotions are linked to reality.

Imagination describes a circle. It takes fragments of reality and transforms them and the new fragments

take shape and reenter reality. Imagination is both emotional and intellectual, and this is why, Vygotsky (1995) explained, it develops creativity.

Vygotsky's (1995) attitude to social realism developed into an approach in which he described the process of consciousness as dynamic, both reproductive and creative, and based on objective memory and personal sense.

Vygotsky's (1995) approach to creativity differed from Leontiev's (1982) theory of activity. The difference is noticeable in their theories of children's play. Vygotsky (1995) talked about play as imagination in action: a creative process that develops in play because a real situation takes a new and unfamiliar meaning. Leontiev (1982), on the other hand, had a social-realistic approach.

When a child creates, it is a syncretistic creativity, which means that the different arts have not been separated and specialized, Vygotsky (1995) wrote. The child does not distinguish between poetry and prose, narrative from drama. The child draws and tells stories at the same time, plays theatre and creates the text for the role of his own. The child does not work a long time with his work, but creates. It looks like a play with a quick discharge of emotions.

Leontiev (1982) sets out from the material reality. Play is not a dynamic meeting between the internal and the external, according to Vygotsky's opinion, but activity is related to things and objects. Imagination develops from external action, and it is not a result of the meeting between internal emotions and the child's experiences. According to Leontiev, the action involving the stick is what calls forth the child's imagination, not vice versa. Play is a reproduction of reality. It is a social-realistic approach, and the description of the development of children's play contains different stages: It moves from socially oriented actions with objects, in which the action is realistic and has a logical behavior, to social relationships between people and social activities, and these relationships are realistic. The child is not dramatizing [as in Vygotsky's (1995) theory, in which emotion colors the action], he is simply reproducing what is typical and general (Leontiev, 1982).

Leontiev (1982) adapted his theory to the development in the Soviet Russia, thereby emphasizing reproduction rather than production (creativity), and adult intervention in play, rather than a creative approach, as in Vygotsky's (1995) theory.

Searching for the Culture of Education and Cultural Psychology

Only recently, and with considerable hesitation, have American psychologists begun to entertain the idea of a closer alliance with the humanities, wrote Kozulin, in an article as late as 1993. Half a century has passed since Vygotsky created the cultural–historical theory. Kozulin claimed that literature can serve as a prototype of the most advanced forms of human psychological life and as a concrete psychological tool that mediates human experiences. Interpreting Vygotsky’s cultural–historical theory, it has often been overlooked that, unlike other pioneers of psychology, Vygotsky started his career with work on the *Psychology of Art*. There is an inner logic in such a beginning, and he tries to reveal specifically human dimensions of behavior and thinking. No issues about creativity and imagination have been focused upon in Vygotsky’s work. His ideas have been interpreted in relation to cognitive and rational theories, for instance, Piaget’s theory of knowledge.

The biological approach, which has characterized psychology during the 20th century, has been replaced by a cultural approach. The humanities have influenced the social sciences, with their qualitative methods: focusing, understanding, and interpretation. In psychology and education, many scientists have defined their concepts in cultural terms. Several books about cultural psychology have been published in the 1990s, often inspired by the cultural–historical theory (Bruner, 1996; Cole, 1996; Valsiner, 1987).

Jerome Bruner’s book, *The Culture of Education* (1996), summarizes the new approach to consciousness and learning of the last century. Consciousness develops in a social and cultural context, Bruner wrote. The human being masters and transforms his or her own inner psychological processes with the help of symbolic tools—signs, symbols, and texts. The world takes on meaning through dialogue with other people. Humanity is creative. Education deals with multilayered texts, and they are contextual. That is why the narrative has been an important way of educating a human being. Learning is a matter of creating meaning, and, through literature (narratives), you can create your own world. The important thing is to be sensitive to the context, and not insensitive to it, as the scientific approach prescribes.

Kozulin (1993) reasoned in a similar way when, in connection with his analysis of Vygotsky’s psychology,

he criticized those who use scientific inquiry as a prototype of the logic of human thought and a sign of higher forms of theorizing. This excludes forms of thought that are based on art and literature, in which dialogue is the norm rather than the exception. Our intellect, on the other hand, is monological and does not get in contact with other areas of thinking. For this reason, it is important to make the consciousness, not the intellect, the central concept of human thinking. Consciousness contains the dialogue between different systems of meaning, and it merges rationality and aesthetics. The dialogical interpretation of Vygotsky’s theory has been brought to the forefront in connection with Bakhtin’s (1981) ideas.

Kozulin (1993) said that a humanistic interpretation of Vygotsky’s theory leads to a *prospective* education for the future. Traditional education has been *retrospective*. The cultural tradition was understood, and the task of a student was to absorb this tradition and the intellectual tools associated with it. Prospective education implies that a student should be capable of approaching problems that do not yet exist at the moment. The student must be oriented toward productive (creative), rather than reproductive, knowledge. Vygotsky’s *inner speech* and its dialogical character give a basis for an interpretation of a dynamic relation between consciousness and the world. Vygotsky’s approach emphasizes *personal sense* and the creative process of knowledge, where literature can be the tool.

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