Mind, Culture, and Activity

The primacy of mediated action in sociocultural studies

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The Primacy of Mediated Action in Sociocultural Studies

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After a brief overview of the reasons for using "sociocultural," as opposed to "cultural-historical," "sociohistorical," or some other term, it is argued that an adequate account of the agenda for sociocultural research must be grounded in the notion of "mediated action." Drawing on the writings of Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and others it is argued that mediated action must be understood as involving an irreducible tension between the mediational means provided by the sociocultural setting, on the one hand, and the unique, contextualized use of these means in carrying out particular concrete actions, on the other. In this view, any attempt to reduce the basic unit of analysis of mediated action to the mediational means or to the individual in isolation is misguided. It is suggested that by using mediated action as a unit of analysis the human sciences will be in a better position to address some of today's most pressing social issues.

In recent years there has been an increasing amount of research and writing devoted to "sociocultural" studies (e.g., Baker-Sennet, Matusov, & Rogoff, 1992; Forman, Minick, & Stone, 1993; Wertsch, 1991; Wertsch, del Rio, & Alvarez, in press). As a result, the term "sociocultural" has come to take on a new set of meanings associated with an approach, professional societies (the Society for Sociocultural Research), and so forth. In this article I shall outline what I see as one of the defining notions of what at least some sociocultural research efforts are all about. This is the notion of "mediated action."

I begin with a few comments about terminology, specifically about why I prefer "sociocultural" (e.g., sociocultural approach, sociocultural research) to "cultural psychology" (Cole, 1990; Shweder, 1990). My preference is grounded in the belief that an adequate treatment of the issues involved here will require a kind of transdisciplinary, or nondisciplinary approach and that the term "sociocultural" is still relatively free of disciplinary overtones. Cole and Shweder of course provide outstanding examples of interdisciplinary scholarship, but I believe that continued reliance on "psychology" and the modifier "cultural" (usually associated with anthropology) is likely to tempt all too many readers to restrict their disciplinary horizons in ways that will limit our efforts in the long run.

For some readers the "socio" in "sociocultural" will index an orientation toward issues often studied in sociology or social theory and the "cultural" will index a concern for issues typically studied in anthropology and the sociology of culture. From this perspective the term "socio-cultural-historical" might be even more appropriate, though too cumbersome in my view (on this see Cole, in press), since it recognizes the importance of history as a discipline as well. However, I wish to avoid such disciplinary claim staking to the extent possible since I believe that once phenomena become divided up into distinct areas in which distinct disciplinary perspectives are deemed relevant, the possibilities for putting everything back together again become increasingly remote.

For yet other readers, use of the term "sociocultural" may be taken as a code word for Vygotskian. I would be the last to disavow the importance of Vygotsky's insights for a sociocultural approach. However, I would note that one should not equate a sociocultural approach with a purely Vygotskian one. Indeed, Vygotsky seldom, if ever, used the term "sociocultural," employing instead the terms "cultural historical" and "sociohistorical," terms which reflect a perspective that differs in an essential way from the ones I am addressing here.

One of the most important of these differences grows out of Vygotsky's concern with creating a Marxist psychology. Because of this as well as because of his reliance on cultural evolutionists of his time, Vygotsky tended to reduce cultural differences to differences in evolutionary status. For example, the studies he and Luria conducted in Central Asia in the 1930s (Luria, 1976) are more properly understood as cross-historical than as cross-cultural in their assumptions. Such an approach to cultural phenomena is filled with theoretical and political pitfalls (Wertsch, 1991), and I therefore do not accept certain essential aspects of Vygotsky's formulation when trying to outline a sociocultural approach.

So much for what a sociocultural approach is not. In the long run, it is of course more important to say what it is. At the most general level a sociocultural approach concerns the ways in which human action, including mental action (e.g., reasoning, remembering), is inherently linked to the cultural, institutional, and historical settings in which it occurs. The relationship at issue here between human action and sociocultural setting is not one of unidirectional causality. In particular, the claim is not that sociocultural settings somehow cause human action. In a sense, just the reverse may often seem to be the case—human action may seem to constitute sociocultural settings. Instead of formulating the relationships involved here in terms of bifurcations and oppositions, the intent is to view human action and sociocultural setting as analytically distinct, yet inherently interrelated levels of analysis. In this view one cannot provide an account of human action without taking its cultural, institutional, and historical setting into account. On the other hand, such settings are produced and reproduced through human action.

At this level of generality, many readers may find little objectionable in what I have said. Many will be quite sympathetic to the call for explicating relationships between mental processes and the cultural, institutional, and historical settings in which they occur. Difficulties begin to arise, however, when we turn to the problem of exactly how these relationships should be formulated. I have already rejected reductionistic accounts in which mind is explained on the basis of sociocultural setting or vice versa. The problem with trying to avoid these routes, however, is that the alternatives often strike us as simply overwhelming. If we must take all dimensions of the phenomena into account before we can examine any one of them, it seems that there is no manageable way to "break into" the cycle of complex issues at hand.

I would argue that the way out of this quandary is to find a unit of analysis that is nonreductionistic, yet manageable, and I believe that a good candidate for meeting these specifications is *mediated action*. The notion of mediated action I shall outline here derives largely from the writings of Vygotsky and M. M. Bakhtin (1984, 1986). However, there are many other sources to which one could turn when developing this construct. For example, John Dewey's (1938) notion of "instrumental action" is related in many essential aspects, and the ideas laid out by Kenneth Burke (1966, 1969) on "symbolic action" could be used to provide yet another distinct, yet related starting point.

The roots of the notion of mediated action as it is presented here can be traced to Vygotsky's account of "mediation" (oposredstvovanie). As I have noted elsewhere (Wertsch, 1985, 1991), claims about how tools and signs mediate human action became increasingly important for Vygotsky near the end of his career, a point reflected in his 1933 comment that "the central fact about our psychology is the fact of mediation" (1982, p. 166). Basic to this orientation was the understanding that mediational means such as language and technical tools do not simply facilitate forms of action that would occur otherwise. Instead,

> by being included in the process of behavior, the psychological tool alters the entire flow and structure of mental functions. It does this by determining the structure of a new instrumental act, just as a technical tool alters the process of a natural adaptation by determining the form of labor operations (1981, p.137).

In Vygotsky's hands these claims were played out primarily in connection with language. However, this was part of a broader picture in which "the following can serve as examples of psychological tools and their complex systems: language; various systems for counting; mnemonic techniques; algebraic symbol systems; works of art; writing; schemes; diagrams, maps, and mechanical drawings; all sorts of conventional signs; and so on" (Vygotsky, 1981, p.137).

Vygotsky's analysis of mediation is central to understanding his contribution to psychology. Indeed, it is the key in his approach to understanding how human mental functioning is tied to cultural, institutional, and historical settings since these settings shape and provide the cultural tools that are mastered by individuals to form this functioning. In this approach, the mediational means are what might be termed the "carriers" of sociocultural patterns and knowledge.

In developing his line of reasoning on these issues, Vygotsky tended to focus on the process of mastering existing mediational means and said relatively little about how the active employment of these means generates and transforms meanings and cultural tools and how it gives rise to new ones. This should not be taken to indicate that he viewed the process of mastering mediational means simply as one of rote learning; indeed, one of his major contributions was to outline how word meaning develops in complex ways in ontogenesis. However, the telos of this development was understood primarily in terms of mastering an existing meaning system, and hence conforming to an existing sociocultural setting rather than in terms of how active use of a meaning system might transform it.

The shift in emphasis from talking about mediation and mediational means to talking about mediated *action* is motivated in part by the recognition that humans play an active role in using and transforming cultural tools and their associated meaning systems. As Zinchenko (1985) and Wertsch (1985) have argued, some notion of action, rather than word meaning, is more consistent with the general approach in psychology that Vygotsky himself outlined (i.e., it is more consistent with the general formulation by "Vygotsky the methodologist," Davydov and Radzikhovskii, 1985), and it

certainly makes more sense from the perspective of findings in psychology and related disciplines that have emerged over the past half century. In other words, the notion of tool-mediated action (Zinchenko, 1985) or mediated action (Wertsch, 1991) seems to be a good candidate for pursuing a Vygotskian inspired sociocultural research program.

The esssence of mediated action is that it involves a kind of tension between the mediational means as provided in the sociocultural setting, and the unique contextualized use of these means in carrying out particular, concrete actions. In this view, any attempt to reduce this basic unit of analysis to the mediational means or to the individual in isolation is misguided. The temptation to do so is great, however, since at least in the West, we seem to like basic units of analysis that are not left with unresolved, let alone unresolvable tensions. Wertsch, Tulviste, and Hagstrom (1993) have explicated mediated action in terms of agency, which they define as "individual(s)-operating-with-mediational-means," and have argued that agency should not be viewed as something that is a property of the individual considered in isolation. Rather, it "extends beyond the skin" (Wertsch, 1991).

The writings of one of Vygotsky's contemporaries, Bakhtin (1984, 1986) are quite useful in explicating these points about the irreducible tension inherent in mediated action. As a philosopher, cultural historian, and scholar of literature, Bakhtin did not focus on the same set of psychological phenomena that interested Vygotsky. However, his account of the utterance, with its properties of "multivoicedness," or "dialogicality," nonetheless provides essential insights into what the issues under consideration are.

In Bakhtin's hands the utterance, or "the *real unit* of speech communication" (1986, p.71) is a form of mediated action. The mediational means involved include what Bakhtin termed "national languages," which are the usual grammatical systems we understand as a language such as French, Russian, or English. However, one of Bakhtin's major contributions was to identify other levels of language form and meaning systems that serve to mediate the production of utterances (Wertsch, 1991). In particular, he had important insights into what he termed "speech genres" such as military commands and everyday genres of greeting, farewell, and congratulation. According to Bakhtin:

> A speech genre is not a form of language, but a typical form of utterance; as such the genre also includes a certain typical kind of expression that inheres in it. In the genre the word acquires a particular typical expression. Genres correspond to typical situations of speech communication, typical themes, and, consequently, also to particular contacts between the *meanings* of words and actual concrete reality under certain typical circumstances (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 87).

In this view, the production of any utterance entails the invocation of a speech genre (as a mediational means, in the terminology employed here).

> We speak only in definite speech genres, that is, all our utterances have definite and relatively stable typical *forms of construction of the whole.* Our repertoire of oral (and written) speech genres is rich. We use them confidently and skillfully *in practice,* and it is quite possible for us not even to suspect their existence *in theory.* Like Moliere's Monsieur Jourdain who, when speaking in prose, had no idea that was what he was doing, we speak in diverse genres without suspecting that they exist (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 78).

Perhaps because he focused on speech genres rather than the linguistic units typically of concern in linguistics, Bakhtin was able to formulate an account of utterances that clearly recognized the

inherent tension between mediational means (in this case in the form of speech genres) and their unique instantiation. The mediated action of producing utterances was viewed as being shaped by the irreducible combination of cultural tool and unique use. One of the ways in which this surfaced in his writings concerns the difference between the "reiterative" and "nonreiterative" aspects of utterances (and sets of utterances that form a text).

> Every text presupposes a system of signs understandable to everybody (that is, conventional, valid within the limits of a given collectivity), a "language." ... To this system belong all the elements of the text that are repeated and reproduced, reiterative and reproducible. ... At the same time, however, every text (by virtue of constituting an utterance) represents something individual, unique, nonreiterative, and therein lies all its meaning (its intention, the reason why it has been created). ... In relation to this aspect, all that is reiterative and reproducible turns out to be raw materials and means. To that extent, this second aspect, or pole goes beyond the boundaries of linguistics and philology. It is inherent to the text, but becomes manifest only in concrete situations and within sequences of texts (within verbal communication in a given realm). This pole is not tied to the (reiterative) elements of the system of language (that is, to signs), but to other (nonreiterative) texts by particular relations of a dialogical nature (1979, pp. 283-284).

The picture of utterances as mediated action that emerges, then, is again one in which there is an irreducible tension or dialectic between mediational means, with their reiterative properties on the one hand and the uniqueness, or nonrepeatability of instantiation on the other.

In a more general account of mediated action this approach asserts that the instantiated, or concrete, individual use of cultural tools always entails some degree of uniqueness and flexibility. Whether we are concerned with the use of a computer program, the use of a word in a language, or any other form of mediated action, no two concrete uses of a tool are completely identical. Each involves some degree of uniqueness, and each instantiation therefore involves some degree of variation and potential for innovation and creativity. At the same time, however, any instance of mediated action involves a reiterative dimension, a fact that derives from the inclusion of mediational means as an inherent aspect of such action. In this view, the irreducible tension generated by the encounter between mediational means, which are "conventional, valid within the limits of a given collectivity," on the one hand, and the concrete use of these means, which is "individual, unique, nonreiterative," on the other, is entailed in mediated action.

Conclusion

The general issue I have tried to raise here is whether the notion of mediated action can serve as a basic unit of analysis for sociocultural research. For the reasons I have outlined, I believe it can. The key to its viability in this role is the irreducible tension it recognizes between mediational means, on the one hand, and the unique instantiation, or use of these means, on the other. Among other things it seems to me that this unit of analysis provides a way to avoid the "individual-society antinomy" which has been one of the major stumbling blocks in the social sciences (cf. Wertsch, in press). It also provides a means for reintegrating efforts in the social sciences with those in the humanities. Hence, mediated action seems to have the potential for bringing back together many of the divisions of the human sciences that have slipped into isolation—an isolation that is often acrimonious and almost always unproductive.

More importantly, it seems to me that by focusing on mediated action we have a chance to bring the human sciences to bear in productive ways on some of today's most vexing social issues. The

reason for this is that instead of approaching these issues as if they come pre-packaged in isolated, disciplinary slices, we can deal with them in something approximating their real world complexity. This does not constitute a call to forego expertise and specialization, at least of certain sorts. It does, however, constitute a call to keep certain pernicious tendencies of expertise and specialization in check. If the notion of mediated action can provide a kind of "touchstone" or "clearing house" where analyses from a variety of perspectives can keep in contact as they examine complex issues, it will have served its highest potential purpose.

Notes

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