
Vygotskian collaborative project of social transformation

History, politics, and practice in knowledge construction

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Vygotsky's theory has recently evolved as an innovative approach to many fundamental issues in psychology and education. Ironically, however, his legacy is mostly portrayed from the standpoint of outdated – cognitivist and individualist – views on science and history, including in the 'Great Man' version that focuses on sole giants purportedly creating knowledge in ivory towers of purely academic pursuits of little political and practical relevance. This portrayal goes against the very spirit of Vygotskian approach which evolved as a collaborative project unique for its practical, political, and civic engagement and ideological commitment to ideals of social justice, equality, and social change. Moreover, this project went beyond the narrow confines of psychology in its traditional guise of an ivory-tower elitist enterprise separate from sociocultural transformative practices and instead resulted from, participated in, and contributed to the giant social experiment that at the time took place in Russia. Remarkably, Vygotsky's approach de facto embodies, in its real life history, the very theoretical principles central to it, such as the inseparability of knowledge and action, theory and practice, and the collaborative nature of cognition. Analysis reveals proximity of Vygotskian project to a newly evolving perspective on science as culture and practice and addresses ways to mutually enrich this perspective.

Keywords: Vygotsky, Leontiev, Luria, history, psychology, cultural-historical, activity theory, collaborative, knowledge, sociocultural practice, politics

The last several decades have witnessed an unprecedented shift in perceptions of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory – from scarce knowledge of it, to seeing it as one among many accounts of social factors in child development, and eventually, to a wide acknowledgment that this theory provides a unique perspective on human development and implicates profound changes in many fields of psychology and education. As this approach is rapidly gaining in popularity among psychologists and scholars in neighbouring disciplines, its general significance, meaning, and status need to be further explored and spelled out. This need is particularly acute because of the rather narrow interpretation of Vygotskian approach that came to dominate many of its accounts. Namely, this theory and its history so far have been approached mostly from the viewpoint of traditional – cognitivist and individualist – views on science that exclude analysis of moral, practical, and political dimensions and relevance of knowledge. Despite much progress achieved in bringing Vygotsky to the fore of contemporary debates, his approach is viewed as representing yet another theory valuable mostly in terms of its novel and abstract ideas that (a) explain autonomous, mental reality separate from broader contexts of life and (b) themselves are of little political relevance, standing only in a superficial relation to the context of life. In this sense, Vygotsky, not unlike Paolo Freire after him (cf. Glass, 2001), can be said to have been domesticated to suit the politics-neutral ideology that dominate psychology and education today.

In this paper, an alternative view is explored, namely that Vygotskian approach represents far more than a set of neutral theoretical principles in that it goes beyond the confines of a mentalistically understood enterprise of science. This alternative view has been initially inspired by observations on a uniquely collaborative history of Vygotskian project and on impossibility to interpret it outside of the broader context of collaboration and practice (e.g. Stetsenko, 1988, 1993). Indeed, from its inception by Vygotsky and his colleagues in the early 1920s, this project has defied the traditional individualist and mentalist (and ultimately idealist) notions of science. Instead, it evolved as a value-laden collaborative project immersed into sociopolitical and cultural-historical practice of its time, came to embody this practice, and ultimately contributed to it through active participatory stance and civic-scholarly activism by its participants. Moreover, Vygotskian project stretched beyond the confines of science as such (in its traditional mentalist guise) and instead blended the dimensions of

theory and practice in its history, life, and products. Further constitutive feature of this project is its liberating potential rooted in ideals of social justice, equality, and transformation. Perhaps the most striking and unique feature of this project launched by Vygotsky almost 100 years ago is the close rapport between the history of how it has been conceived, brought to life, and carried out, on the one hand, and the core principles advanced and propagated by it, on the other. The social collaborative nature of human mind, the paramount role of social context and history in the production of psychological processes and outcomes such as knowledge, the embeddedness of knowledge in practical transformative engagements with the world, and the inextricable link between practical and theoretical, material and mental, political and intellectual, social and individual – all of these principles characterise both the real life history of Vygotskian project and the very gist of a theory developed in it. In this sense, the congruence between Vygotskian project creation and the foundational principles developed in it provides a living proof of a direct connection between intellectual constructions and the practice, of which these constructions are a part.

Revealing and reflecting upon this mirror congruency between the real life of Vygotskian project and knowledge produced in it can be beneficial for a deeper understanding of both of these dimensions of science. First and foremost, such an analysis can help to better understand that theory and science at large are not separate from life in all the complex unity of its dimensions such as practical goals, conceptual tools, political agendas, moral challenges, and ideological commitments. Such analysis can also help to strengthen and further advance the newly emerging trend in social studies, feminist anthropologies, and history of science that reject rote positivism and instead capitalise on science as a socially determined and historically contingent practice or culture. The potential contribution of Vygotskian project to this line of reasoning is that it laid foundations for and itself embodied the notion of knowledge as a form of active transformative engagement (=meaningful activity) of people with their world – aimed at changing this world (including oneself), conducted in view of social goals and agendas, while making use of and contributing to culturally evolved cultural tools and practices.

Paradoxically, there is little evidence that the newly emerging trends in understanding theory and science are in any way informed by ideas and ideals developed by the Vygotskian school. There is equally little evidence that Vygotskian heritage is being approached from the stand-

point of the new culture- and practice-bound understanding of science and theory. This paper aims to make up for these unfortunate gaps by highlighting a number of core principles that guided history of Vygotsky's project and by revealing the congruency between its history and its core principles. Specifically, Vygotsky's approach (and the respective notion of knowledge and science) will be revealed as (a) direct outcome of and contributor to social practice, (b) entwined with practical, political, and value laden contexts of its creation, (b) embodying this practice in the very fabric of its knowledge, (c) entailing directionality, that is, a commitment to fostering a social equality – based view on human development and society as its essential and ineluctable ingredient, and (d) moving beyond the confines of science as a purist 'thought odyssey', and instead representing a transformative pursuit of new forms of social life. The ultimate goal of this paper is to join the discussion on the status and role of psychological knowledge in today's society and on the ways of making psychology relevant to concerns and needs of this society.

The traditional portrayal of Vygotsky's theory

It is not a secret that psychology has never been at the forefront of either developing or applying advanced principles of meta-theoretical and historical analysis. Psychologists writing on history often employ outdated modes of analysis developed in reconstructions of the nineteenth-century physics based on individualist, mentalist, and context-independency assumptions about knowledge and science (cf. Danziger, 1990).

This is not surprising given that such assumptions comfortably complement the analytical schemes developed in psychology itself, dominated by positivist and cognitivist views on the nature of knowledge and mind. Equipped with the notion of knowledge as an outcome of internal processes in individual solitary minds, psychologists inevitably reconstruct history as being a succession of value-, culture-, and politics-free individual pursuits carried out in a sociocultural and sociopolitical vacuum. Vygotskian theory too has been for the most part approached from such a perspective, resulting in a limited portrayal of both the history and the content of this project.

First, quite a prominent feature of many portrayals of cultural-historical theory is an assertion that it has been 'single-handedly' created by Vygotsky – a solitary and visionary genius neither influenced nor supported by any significant collaboration with colleagues

and even misunderstood and betrayed by many of them (e.g. Kozulin, 1990; Valsiner and van der Veer, 2000). These portrayals of knowledge as products of solitary individuals follow well with the established manner in which history of psychology is presented in most textbooks – as a ‘Great Man’ histories in which lonely ‘giants’ stood apart from his (always his, with no women among them) time and peers (cf. Leahy, 2002), making unique contributions due to unusual personal creativity, insight, or intelligence. This view is at odds with the abundant evidence of a truly collaborative nature of Vygotskian project (to be discussed in the last section of this paper) in how it has been brought to life, worked out, and implemented by a group of people sharing common research agenda and commitments.

Second, the portrayal of Vygotsky as a solitary genius is only partially mitigated by the notions of dialogues and communication of ideas as underpinning the development of science. From this perspective, theories are seen as influenced by communications among members of intellectual communities, whose voices ‘enter’ the knowledge construction. For example, Valsiner and van der Veer (2000) view knowledge construction as a dialogical process of relating to voices and views of others and thus acknowledge its certain social embeddedness in contrast to the more traditional, extremely individualised frameworks. However, they focus on purely intellectual, mentalist forms of interdependency among scholars and inevitably end up with accounts that are social only in a limited sense. Indeed, when knowledge systems are viewed as systems of ideas and cognitive products of mind, then such knowledge systems turn out to be restricted in principle – that is, in their origins, mechanisms of change, and development – to individual subjectivities. Such individual subjectivities inevitably appear as separate from, though not completely independent of, the social realities. As a result, knowledge is reduced to individual creativity and style as the ultimate factors of ‘primary relevance’ (ibid, p.34). This perspective reinforces the elitist myth, especially promulgated since Kuhn’s influential works on science (cf. Fuller, 2000), about scholars as a self-perpetuating group existing in an ivory tower of academic pursuits whose views do not concern and are not shaped by any political underpinnings and ramifications of their work.

Third, historical analysis of psychological theories has not been untouched by the new winds in psychology, and like the discipline itself, this analysis too increasingly concerns the role of contexts and culture. A number of historical reconstructions of Vygotsky’s theory

reflects this trend and includes a thorough analysis of cultural and social circumstances surrounding its development (e.g. Feigenberg, 1996; Kozulin, 1990; Valsiner and Van der Veer, 2000; Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991; Yaroshevsky, 1989).

The laudable motivation to integrate contextual factors into accounts of Vygotsky’s theory mostly turns into painstaking descriptions of sometimes even minute details and vicissitudes of his life and work, including accounts of his family history and all sort of personal quirks. This is typically complemented by descriptions of various facets of political and sociocultural contexts surrounding Vygotsky. Notwithstanding all the importance of such reconstructions (and their considerable difficulty, including meticulous work in archives), and the credit they deserve for expanding our knowledge of Vygotsky, an important element remains missing from this analysis. Namely, missing is an explication of the very mechanisms and processes through which sociopolitical, sociocultural, and personal life contexts can and eventually do make an impact on theories. That is, although this approach pays attention to sociocultural contexts in the production of knowledge, it does not (paralleling the discipline of psychology) raise above simply describing various aspects of these contexts, in often fortuitous combinations, and continues to view them as factors external to knowledge itself. Culture, history, politics, and other contexts remain to be thought of as external factors that somehow influence the process of knowledge construction but do not belong into it.

This is very clear in accounts of Vygotsky’s theory that make no attempts to reveal whether, and how, the very content and major thrust of Vygotsky’s theory are related to the way in which he ideologically and politically positioned himself vis-à-vis the turbulent grandiose societal changes taking place at a time he was working out his approach. Notably, even this political stance itself is ignored and Vygotsky is portrayed as a mere ‘sympathetic bystander’ (Valsiner and van der Veer, 2000, p. 330; see also Feigenber, 1996), never engaged in ‘building a Marxist psychology’ (Kozulin, 1996, p. 328), and instead pursuing abstract issues such as that of nature versus nurture. This goes against Vygotsky’s staunch calls for psychology to create its own ‘Capital’ and his conclusion in one of his most fundamental works that ‘Marxist psychology is not a school amidst schools, but the only genuine psychology as a science’ (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 341). This also goes against abundant evidence of Vygotsky’s truly remarkable polit-

ical activism and first-hand participation in socialist changes throughout his life, documented by his membership, of a high rank and status, in many structures of power after the Revolution (e.g. in the Committee of Socialist Upbringing, prestigious Academy of Communist Upbringing etc, see Vygotskaya and Lifanova, pp. 60, 81). Thus, what is disregarded in these accounts is that Vygotsky (and his colleagues) was developing his approach from the midst of deeply political involvements in the broad societal project of establishing new psychology and new society itself and that these involvements became transposed into the body of knowledge that he produced (see details in the last section). In other words, disregarded is the context itself, understood not as a compendium of external influences, but as a historical social practice (of which science is only a part), instantiated by people (including scholars) as agents shaped by history and shaping it.

Construction of knowledge as a collaborative social activity imbued with practical relevance and ideology

An approach to knowledge much more inclusive of history, politics, ideology, and practices of knowledge production has been recently evolving in psychology and other social sciences (e.g. Danziger, 1990; Walkerdine, 2000; Morawski, 1997, 2001; Narayan, and Harding, 2000), as well as in the participatory approach that places issues of power and politics at the centre (e.g. Fine, and Harris, 2001). These works build upon many previous elaborations on the theory – ladenness of facts and observations, on the role of social factors in shaping science, and on the non-essentialist and historicised nature of knowledge. In this approach, science is revealed to be much more than an intellectual enterprise separate from the practical ‘life’ of theories and the contexts of their creation. The works that employ this practice-gearred view of science are still an exception rather than a rule in psychology. In addition, these works do not include any accounts of Vygotsky. This needs to be amended not only to fill the gap in these otherwise extremely illuminating accounts of science and history, but also to do justice to Vygotskian project that, perhaps as no other in psychology, directly embodied and implicated the placing of practice at the foundation of analysing and doing science.

Broad foundations of the Vygotskian project

Although Vygotsky did not explicitly conceptualise knowledge as being a form of a practical collaborative activity that relates people to

each other and to the world around them and is aimed at meaningfully transforming the world in accordance with ideology-driven goals and agendas, his works and the works of his colleagues laid important foundations for such a conceptualisation.

One of the pillars of Vygotskian project was the idea that human development is based on active transformations of existing environments and creation of new ones through collaborative processes of producing and deploying tools. This idea is reflected in Vygotsky’s creative assimilation of Marxist premise that ‘...[the] base for human thinking is precisely man changing nature and not nature alone as such, and the mind developed according to how man learned to change nature’ (Engels quoted in Vygotsky, 1997, p. 56; italics in the original). This position set Vygotskian project far apart from approaches prevalent in his time (and today) that place biological adaptation at the centre of human development (e.g. Piaget). The collaborative processes of social practice (involving development and passing on, from generation to generation, the collective experiences of people reified in tools, including language) represent a form of exchange with the world that is unique to humans – the social practice of labour, or human activity. In these social and historically specific processes people not only constantly transform and create their environment; they also create and constantly transform their very life, consequently changing themselves in fundamental ways and, in the process, gaining self-knowledge and knowledge about the world. Therefore, human activity – material, practical, and always, by necessity, social collaborative processes aimed at transforming the world and people themselves – is the basic form of human life that lies at the very foundation and is formative of everything that is human in humans, including knowledge produced by them¹

Because human labour inevitably entails collective efforts of people, its development gives rise to increasingly complex social exchanges and to individual mechanisms allowing for these exchanges to be carried out. Both forms emerge precisely because they are needed to regulate the collective material production of human life. It was arguably the greatest insight of Marx that the social (inter-subjective) and the individual (intra-subjective) forms of social life became demystified as being derivative from (though not reducible to) the processes of material production of life. However, whereas Marx focused primarily on the dynamics, contradictions within, and transformations between the material production of human existence, on

the one hand, and the emerging collective forms of its regulation (i.e., human society) – on the other, Vygotskian project addressed two other forms of interdependency critical for human development.

Specifically, Vygotsky focused on exploring the functioning and transformations between the societal and the individual forms of life, relatively (and inevitably) neglected in Marxist philosophical and economical analyses. The idea that became pivotal for Vygotsky was that the social exchanges between people were at the foundation of all intra-subjective processes, as the latter ones originate from the inter-subjective ones in both the history of civilisation and of individual life (cf. the famous law of development, Vygotsky, 1999). For Vygotsky, the transitions from inter-subjective to intra-subjective psychological processes by means of cultural mediation became the focus of analysis. Leontiev and other colleagues of Vygotsky focused relatively more on how the material forms of activity and practice are transformed into intra-psychological processes (in what became termed ‘activity theory’).

Thus, Vygotsky and his colleagues were arguably the first psychologists to expand Marxist approach to further unravel the centuries-old mystery of human subjectivity – by revealing its origination in the processes of material production and social exchanges instead of viewing it as ephemeral phenomena detached from these exchanges and evolving on their own mentalist grounds. In Vygotskian project, the genuinely constructive practical material processes as they evolve in history were shown to be implicated in producing the dialogical realm of human interactions, subjectivity, and social life itself. Expanding Vygotskian notion of knowledge as a collaborative activity. As just described, Vygotsky and his colleagues’ approach is based on a thoroughly historicised account of human development as derivative from the processes of material production that engender both the social relations among people and the individual subjectivity, including knowledge. This view provides a non-reductionist ontological foundation for conceptualising knowledge as emerging within the broader reality of transformative social practices and signifies a break with ‘ontological mutism’ typical of so many alternative accounts.

If this approach is expanded by an emphasis on the reciprocally constitutive role of human subjectivity in the emergent reality of social practice and dialogical interactions, then knowledge can be theorised in its practical relevance – as being immanently present in activities that people carry out to contribute to meaningfully changing the world.

This also helps to mitigate a certain imbalance in Vygotskian project in that it capitalised on individuals acquiring cultural practices and addressed less the agentive role of people in contributing to and transforming these practices. Central to this expansion is the idea that the human subjectivity, the collective processes of material production, and the social interactions all co-evolve as parts of a unified system constitutive of human social life, interpenetrating and influencing each other, while never becoming completely detached from each other. In this case, a continuum is outlined – from material to mental and from individual to social – with human subjectivity not only stemming from but also participating in and contributing to collective material practice, enacting this practice, at the same time as this practice enacts it. Then the processes and products of human development, including knowledge, self and society, knowledge and science – all appear as emergent properties of the same reality of collaborative human practices, albeit differing in degree of generality, power, and role in the genesis of social life.

This conceptualisation opens ways to address the dialectical manifold transitions and mutual penetrations among all of these facets of a unified system of human social life, including transitions between knowledge and practice that take place in a constant, never-ending dynamical flow of collective practices. It also allows a clear role to be ascribed to the processes and products of human subjectivity, such as knowledge systems and theories, in the larger contexts of social practices.

First, in this perspective, knowledge can be explicated in terms of its ontology, that is, the very type of reality that it belongs to. Based on Vygotskian project, the phenomena traditionally termed as ideas, theories, and knowledge do not appear as a separate mental realm detached from processes of ‘doing science’ in the world. Neither are these processes understood as merely being a precondition existing apart from theories and ideas – as is assumed in the mentalist view of science with its insurmountable split between knowledge and practice. Instead, the processes of doing science, on the one hand, and theories and ideas, on the other, appear as being of essentially the same nature, as made up of the same ‘fabric’ – as different levels of the same reality of human collaborative transformative activity. What is characteristic of theories and knowledge is that they come to reify these activities in the specific medium of concepts, models, and other discursive devices. That is, the seemingly separate realms of theories and practice are seen

as differing only in details such as their level of generalisation and the specific means that they employ in dealing with reality.

Furthermore, the processes of doing science are conceptualised not at a microgenetic level of actions, as in some models of science (e.g. Latour, 1999), but as transformative activities of people who ultimately pursue real-life practical and ideology-driven projects in society beyond the laboratory world. The procedures ('action') and the theory ('knowledge') are different only in details but share a great deal of more important things – common roots, history, mission, orientation – in one word, a firm grounding in the world that they stand for, contribute to, and generally instantiate or perform.

Second, in view of knowledge existing only in the ongoing and never-ending collaborative practices of transforming the world, knowledge too appears to be a process rather than a product, a dynamical phenomenon that needs to be performed and enacted, rather than stored and then retrieved from some space 'in the mind.' That is, knowledge appears as neither an end-product, nor a separate 'destination' of ever expanding human practices. Even when the subjective pole of activity appears to be the final goal, such as in a scholarly activity of theory-building, seemingly detached from mundane practices, this subjective 'theoretical' pole is an important participant in and contributor to social practices and collaborative exchanges between scholars and the world. In this sense, knowledge and theories have agency and practical relevance in the world in that they inevitably enact, bring about, and foster certain practices in and visions of the world. Even theories that change nothing in and about the world do actually contribute to it, albeit only by preserving the status quo and preventing changes in it. In this sense, knowledge has an ineluctable practical relevance, always contributing to processes and practices in the world, always coming out of the world and returning to it (cf. Morawski, 2001). In this sense, knowledge can be said to have meaning and other 'inherent' features (e.g. objectivity, validity, certainty) only within these practices and relative to them.

When knowledge is conceptualised as a form of a collaborative social activity aimed at transforming the world, as a form of changing and engaging the world, it becomes particularly clear that knowledge is always value-laden and moral, produced and achieved only from a certain standpoint that inevitably is taken by those who produce it (cf. Harding, 1991). These moral standpoint and commitment are most visibly channelled into the body of knowledge in the process of estab-

lishing and elaborating specific goals of research agendas that scientists pursue. Research goals inevitably reflect moral commitments and standpoints of their creators because they address the questions as to how, what for, and especially for who's benefit each research agenda is carried out. This perspective implicates not only answerability of human subjectivity to certain contexts and conditions that existed in the past or exist now, but also its addressivity, as each research answers to past and presently given conditions and also envisions future conditions (and worlds), thereby by extension contributing to the creation of these future human conditions. Importantly, by being channelled into research goals, the personalised (but simultaneously social, in view of an inevitably collective authoring of knowledge) commitments and moral stands, through their representation in research goals, become reflected also in each and every aspect of research – from the more theoretical down to more technical ones, such as the selection of 'data sources,' research sites, methodology, forums of presentation, and so on.

Thus, in view of the primacy of ongoing transformative engagements with the world, the subjective elements of these engagements, including knowledge, never merely reflect, embody, or reify the world. Instead, knowledge embodies past practices, at a given point in history and in a given sociopolitical space, to only momentarily reflect these past practices in a form that can be put to further use in view of commitments to future practices and visions of the world. Individual constructs such as personal styles as elements in knowledge construction are not denied in this perspective. Neither are contexts and circumstances of knowledge production. However, both of these 'elements' are assigned with a role that differs from traditional accounts and they are not seen as determining per se the process of knowledge production. Because knowledge systems are conceptualised neither as direct products of a mental machinery, nor as replicas of external influences, the mechanisms of knowledge production, in Vygotskian account, are sought elsewhere. Namely, knowledge is conceptualised as constituted by a realm that stretches beyond individual minds and external worlds taken apart from each other – by the realm of activities (always social, collaborative, practical) that relate scholars to the world around them and to themselves. It is only these activities that produce, impart meaning on, and ultimately determine such social products as knowledge. In other words, knowledge is seen as collectively achieved in the process of activities

by groups of collaborating individuals – activities that relate them to their world and, as such, come to reflect and embody, in an inseparable blend, both the socio-political and cultural-historical contexts that individuals are immersed in, on the one hand, and the unique positioning, answerability, and agency of these individuals vis-à-vis their contexts, on the other.

Finally, seeing science and knowledge as social collaborative activities aimed at transforming the world is the platform that allows to counter the now popular relativist stance of social constructionism (e.g. Gergen, 1994), according to which theory and knowledge are indeterminate as to their truth and value. Vygotskian-based view, in contrast, establishes the ineluctable determinacy and certainty of science (in all of its instruments and constituents), including in its value-, moral-, objectivity- and truth-related dimensions. This determinacy and certainty, however, have to do not with anything inherent to science and knowledge per se, but rather with them being elements in, and instantiations of, the broader realities of transformative practices in the world. Since the ultimate purpose and meaning of science are seen as grounded in its role and ability to contribute to inevitably determinate pursuits undertaken in a certain direction and with certain goals of creating changes in the world, knowledge too turns out to be determinate and directional. This is not an old-fashioned, positivist-type, ahistorical determinacy of science that purportedly can be established irrespective of a broader practice from which the conclusions about truth and value are reached. Neither is it a complete indeterminacy and uncertainty of constructivist accounts. Instead, it is a kind of a historically and culturally foregrounded determinacy of science that has to do with it being a practical, goal-oriented, and therefore, transformative and value-laden pursuit of always determinate versions of the world. This inevitably marks science and knowledge with determinacy, directionality, and commitment.

In general then, knowledge can be seen as a practical act in the world because it always comes out of active transformative practices and always returns into them, serving as an important step in carrying out these practices and having its grounding, its mode of existence, and its ultimate 'raison d'être' in its practical relevance within these broader transformative (inevitably politics-, moral-, and ideology-ridden) practices. Moreover, knowledge not only provides accounts of the world, ascribing value by virtue of a selective emphasis on certain features of the world (cf. Morawski, 2001), but in addition – and simultaneously –

embodies past practices and entails future ones in hierarchical multi-layered patterns, thus directing these practices according to moral and political agendas and aspired versions of reality. In this sense, knowledge is an alive, generative, and deeply historical process imbued with human values and also linking the past, the present, and the future. That knowledge may appear as an abstract and autonomous reality detached from issues of real life practice, history, and politics is the vestige of a thinking shaped by the centuries-old split not only between mind and body, but also between knowledge and action, social and individual. This split is underpinned by a lack of understanding that all of these phenomena are just different dynamical instantiations of practice that form and realise this practice, as they are simultaneously formed and realised by practice in a continuous flow of social life.

Knowledge as a collaborative practice: Embodiment in the Vygotskian project

The presented conceptualisation of science and knowledge, derived from cultural-historical approach, can be seen directly embodied in the very life and history of this approach. Below we briefly discuss this mirror congruency.

Collaborative nature

Firstly, the profoundly collaborative nature of Vygotsky's project (to a large extent ignored in previous accounts²), congruent with the notion of knowledge and mind as collaborative processes, needs to be underscored. This project represented fruits of a work by a group of enthusiastic colleagues and followers of Vygotsky – Alexander Luria, Alexey Leontiev, Lydia Bozhovich, Alexander Zaporozhets, Natalia Morozova, Daniil Elkonin, Liya Slavina, Rosa Levina, and several others – who participated in discussing, spelling out, and writing up the initial assumptions of what is termed Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. There are numerous first-hand accounts how these researchers (first the famous 'trojka' – Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev, later joined by other 5 to form the circle of 'eight' and then expanded further) engaged in group discussions, developing many ideas in a truly collective dialogue. For example, Luria directly states that many ideas have been developed in discussions and debates (quoted in E. A. Luria, 1994, p. 42). Vygotsky mirrors this perception when he speaks of 'the common path' in science and refers to this theory as 'our theory' in letters to his colleagues (e.g. to Leontiev, in 1929; quoted in

Vygotskaya and Lifanova, 1996, pp. 210-211). A quote from Vygotsky's letter to Luria, responding to Luria's report on his expedition to Asia, is particularly telling

Dear Alexander Romanovich,

I am writing literally in such an excitement that is rare to be experienced in life. I cannot remember a day with more joy and light. This is literally a key to so many problems in psychology ... That this study is of primary significance is out of doubt, and our new path is now asserted by you not merely theoretically but also practically and experimentally (see E. Luria, 1994, p. 65; emphasis added – AS and IA)

One particular form of such group discussions was the so-called conferences where participants presented their research and exchanged views (e.g. Vygotskaya and Lifanova, 1996). Even when direct discussions were difficult to organise (due to turbulent times, participants often had to change locations, working sometimes far from Moscow), their cooperation continued through frequent visits to each other (A. A. Leontiev, 2003).

One further form of cooperation is represented by correspondence among members of the group (e.g. published in E. Luria, 1994; Vygotskaya and Lifanova, 1996), through which many ideas and arguments were refined, negotiated, and developed.

These letters (and memoirs, e.g. Elkonin, 1989; Luria, 1982) reveal another unique feature of Vygotsky's school, namely that its private and professional dimensions were often merged. Participants saw themselves as not merely colleagues, but as one 'collective' of friends, working and personally growing together, open to and even co-responsible for each other (e.g. Vygotsky's letter to Morozova of 1930 and Luria's commemoration of Vygotsky in 1935; both quoted in Vygotskaya and Lifanova, 1996, pp. 165-66, 330). These letters exemplify a unique blending of professional with private, intellectual with emotional, warm and confidential with determined and goal oriented. They also reveal their authors' strikingly clear awareness of the collaborative nature of their efforts and their common path in science.

Co-operation within Vygotsky's school was far from being merely intellectual also in the sense that its members not only exchanged and co-developed ideas, but also engaged in a collaborative practical work. For example, they together carried out the first and often critically significant empirical tests of the new theory, such as Leontiev's study

on memory and Luria's expedition to Asia to explore cultural-historical origins of thinking. They also worked together in clinics and schools, developing their ideas in and through practical work, for example, with handicapped children. Perhaps even more importantly, this group of people also went on to develop and broadly disseminate Vygotsky's theory during decades after his death in 1934. Although there was a lengthy gap in publications of Vygotsky's works from mid-1930s till 1956, his approach, contrary to a common misunderstanding, never disappeared from the psychological 'scene' in Russia. These works were taken as a foundation in numerous research projects, including the founding of research laboratories (i.e. at the Institute of Defectology and of General and Pedagogical Psychology in Moscow), which continue to be vastly based on Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky's early published works and unpublished manuscripts were in wide circulation among psychologists (e.g. the latter were available at the Moscow State University library and taught as the centrepiece of psychology at least since 1960s) and never stopped to play a formative role for several generations of psychologists in this country.

Continuing with Vygotsky's legacy was far from merely an intellectual feat. It was also a feat of courage in that his colleagues withstood the ordeals of a turbulent epoch, continuing this tradition even during the darkest years of Stalinist repressions when this theory was under attack. Whereas there were many scholars, including psychologists, denouncing each other and confessing in various 'sins' under political pressures, the absence of such denunciations by Vygotsky's immediate followers in the sinister atmosphere of the time (and the likely related amazing fact that none of them was persecuted, in sharp contrast to other scientific schools) is a token of their commitment and moral.

Quite revealing of the collaborative nature of Vygotsky's school is that even the authorship of its central works such as *Tool and sign* is not easy to determine: because historical records are unclear, this work has been published with varying authorship (i.e., Vygotsky, 1999; Vygotsky and Luria, 1994). The collaborative nature of Vygotskian project sheds light on why so few interpretations of his texts have been written after his death – likely because his followers did not see them as the remnants of the past that needed to be interpreted, instead employing them as the working tool for furthering the same research agenda.

The development of cultural-historical theory after Vygotsky often included thorough critical reflections on and re-working of many

initial assumptions. Leaving aside the intricacies of conceptual differences among various branches of this theory (which remain to be vastly under-investigated and misunderstood), we can only mention that its foundational ideas, in our view, were preserved in later versions such as Leontiev's activity theory, Luria's neuropsychology, Galperin's and Davydov's approach in education and others.

We also do not want to create a rosy picture of Vygotskian school. Like any other collective, this one, in all probability, did not avoid conflicts and tensions (historical accounts provide some hints but are rather murky). All of these notwithstanding, this school seems to have been representative of what a development of genuine scientific schools might be – full of struggle and contradictions, mutual respect and disagreements, devotion and doubts (perhaps even betrayals), conflicts and challenges, continuities and disruptions, leaps forward and periods of stagnation. Reconstructing the full scope of the cultural-historical puzzle of Vygotskian school remains to be the task for the future, demanding collaborative efforts by many scholars. However, what already appears clear is that the profoundly collaborative nature of Vygotsky's project and its many unique qualities as discussed above (e.g. the blending of personal and professional; the interpenetration of a life-long friendship and a commitment to a common cause; stark awareness of sharing common path) was not simply an outcome of their somehow unique individualities (if these are conceptualised as existing before and separately from the work of their life) but had everything to do with the kind of project they were developing. This is the topic of the next section.

Knowledge as an ideology-driven practice. Just as knowledge can be described, in Vygotskian project, as an outcome and vehicle of ultimately practical, inevitably ideological, collaborative engagements with the world, so Vygotsky and his colleagues' own intellectual products were by no means outcomes of their merely intellectual processes. Their approach and knowledge developed in it were part and parcel of the practical, and simultaneously deeply ideological and passionate, project that came out of drama of life, not of ideas, and that also returned to this life to transform it. This knowledge was a product, and simultaneously a vehicle, of their collaborative practical engagements with a unique socio-historical context that presented them with an unprecedented challenge – and opportunity! – to devise a new system of psychology in parallel with creating a new society itself. As mentioned in previous sections, Vygotsky and his followers were

deeply engaged in practical endeavours and pursuits, first and foremost, in reorganising the whole national system of education and devising special rehabilitation programs for homeless and handicapped children. Reorganising and de facto creating anew this system of education – literally from scratch, overcoming strong opposition from old structures and attuning it to the totally new sociopolitical realities and ideology – inevitably was a deeply political endeavour. Given that the new political regime proclaimed education to be among its absolute priorities, Vygotsky was literally in the middle of sociopolitical processes, not just as its participant but as an important actor (e.g. likely associated with and supported by Krupskaya, top party official in education and Lenin's widow; cf. Prawat, 2000). This civic engagement and socio-political activism were so central to Vygotsky and his followers, that these activities literally interpenetrated their academic pursuits turning them into a truly unique blend of theory, knowledge, practice, ideology, and politics.

Any theory always comes out of, participates in, and contributes to specific forms of life and society. Psychometric theories of intelligence are also parts and parcels of social practices, namely those in which people are ranked along a continuum of purportedly inborn and unchangeable capacities of minds and on these grounds ascribed an unequal access to societal resources such as education. These theories, as most other psychological frameworks developed in the twentieth century, were also geared to the goals of social control in societies with entrenched ideology of preserving the status quo rather than pursuing social transformations (cf. Danziger, 1990). Therefore, it is impossible to see and appreciate the unique blending of theory, practice, and politics in Vygotskian project without addressing the difficult question about ideology that its members were obviously so closely associated with. Too often this question is either excluded (in the narrowly mentalist expositions of Vygotsky) or presumed to have a clear-cut answer delivered from the Olympian heights of today's democracy presented as the ultimate model for a just society. This is a difficult question particularly for those who are superficially familiar with history of Russia and the Soviet Union or are personally invested in opposite ideologies. What is overlooked in these cases is that the ideology introduced by the revolution of 1917 could and in reality did appeal to many progressive thinkers, including Vygotsky, due to its emphasis on social equality, liberation of the oppressed (workers, ethnic minorities), women's emancipation, and social transformation

through equal access to education (i.e., mass literacy). These features are not eliminated even in light of tragic failings of this ideology, as it became hijacked by a totalitarian regime (turning Vygotskian project, similarly to the fate of other paradigms, into an arrested social movement, cf. Fuller, 2000). Therefore, perhaps the best way to capture Vygotsky's political stance is to compare it to Paulo Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed, except that Freire's ideas revolved around the need for a social revolution while Vygotsky wrote from within a society in which such revolution already had taken place.³

Here also lies an important and so far overlooked difference between Vygotsky and other progressivist thinkers, such as John Dewey. Whereas Vygotsky (like Freire after him) developed his approach from within his practical pursuits with a clear political-ideological agenda grounded in a socialist view of democracy, Dewey's works are marked by the quest for uncertainty. Dewey, though admittedly a more radical voice than generally assumed (cf. Westbrook, 1991), posits the centrality of inquiries to explore differences and conflicts with an ultimate goal of nurturing pluralism, diversity, and responsiveness. For Dewey, human action and knowledge evolve in the present, as living events that exist here and now, with neither much grounding in the past (cf. Diggins, 1994),⁴ nor continuity between the past, the present, and the future. Moreover, Dewey's theory, though linked to and formative of a progressive view of participatory democracy, is less grounded in a program of actions with a clear ideological and political direction. Deweyan reliance on self-evolving adaptations resulting from inquiries and open-ended quests thus can be usefully expanded by goal-directness, directionality, and certainty of Vygotsky and Freire.

Comparisons of Dewey, Freire, and Vygotsky are potentially important for understanding the present state of democracy and the role of psychology in charting policies and practices in response to the mounting challenges of a continuing inequality, especially on the global scale. In particular, the present dominant trend in social sciences to embrace the uncertainties and pluralism of knowledge and of ideology claims (e.g. in social constructionism and other postmodern frameworks), though important, need not to be the final goal. Instead, it needs to be expanded by the science of commitments and directionality to avoid the separation of theory and practice, knowledge and action, that inadvertently impedes progress in devising science and education aimed at liberation and social justice.

Returning to Vygotsky's project, the goals of creating new

psychology for a society that itself needed to be created, and the interpenetration of the two, guided this project and turned it into an instrument of social transformation and change. This interpenetration also defined each and all of this project's constitutive elements – its research questions and goals, its epistemology and criteria of justification, its methodology and concepts. This project thus can be seen as a novel type of psychology with a new mission, devoted not to pursuit of knowledge but to creating new forms of social life and practice. In carrying out this project of social transformation, through a direct linkage to creating new radical alternatives in the conditions of social existence, its participants produced knowledge of a radical sort and, in the process, changed and liberated themselves.

All major concepts and ideas of Vygotsky's project reflect its unique orientation toward freedom and social transformation and can be re-interpreted in this light. Human development as the social and historical process; psychological processes as collaborative pursuits of meaningful transformative tasks; teaching-and-learning as a social transformative practice that leads development; the zone of proximal development as a social endeavour in which new horizons of development are collaboratively co-created; new revolutionary methods of treatment through alternating social conditions of life; practice being the linchpin of theory – these all are examples of a direct mirror congruency between Vygotsky's project own grounding in social transformative practice on the one hand, and ideas and practice it produced – on the other. The key question of Vygotskian project is telling in this respect – how to create psychological processes that set individuals free, rather than how to observe the existing processes.

Thus, knowledge about development of freedom and agency was derived from practical pursuits by Vygotsky and his colleagues to create the conditions for freedom in real life. This knowledge simultaneously was put to work and enriched in these pursuits to then guide new cycles of social transformations, thus closing the gap between theory and practice by integrating them in one ongoing never-ending dynamical cycle of transformative social practice, in which knowledge and actions are inseparably blended, enacting and generating each other. In a similar vein, understanding Vygotsky's work is arguably best achieved in pursuits of meaningful socio-practical tasks beyond Vygotsky. That is, the best way to understand Vygotskian project is to turn it into an instrument of social practice. This would continue the life of Vygotskian project and thus constitute a new turn in the constant,

never-ending flow of human knowledge/practice understood as an active transformation of the world in the unity of its theoretical and practical dimensions. Kurt Lewin's famous expression that there is nothing more practical than a good theory could thus be expanded, in the spirit of Vygotskian approach, by the mirror expression – that there is nothing more theoretically rich than a good practice. The works by Vygotsky and his colleagues are a living embodiment of such a two-fold view, suggesting an alternative to psychology's outdated image and dubious social role in perpetuating the status quo in society. Instead, they help to open this discipline to the challenges of creating a new, free and equal, society for all – the challenges that are as urgent today as they were a century ago.

Notes

1. This theme can be derived from Vygotsky's ideas that '...an active change in the nature of man is essential. It is the basis of all human history' (ibid); and '[e]ach stage in mastering the forces of nature necessarily corresponds to a certain stage in mastering behaviour' (1997, p. 55), with novel human development shaped by 'the fact of social life and interaction of people' (ibid).
2. For example, van der Veer and Valsiner state that 'Vygotsky's vision of a large collective working for a common cause was never realised' (1991, p. 289). Although they mention that Vygotsky cooperated with a some people, this is not accorded with any significant role and, moreover, is de facto dismissed by characterising this cooperation as 'religious movement' (ibid, p. 13) with 'Messianic tones' (ibid, p. 290).
3. It is a mystery to us why these scholars have not been analysed together. The similarity of their positions is so profound that it is hard not to impute Freire's knowledge of at least some works from Vygotsky's circle. We have no material to support this hypothesis, except a little known fact that Helena Antipoff (1992 to 1974), a psychologist educated in Russia and likely familiar with Vygotskian works, later became an important figure in education in Brazil (de Freitas Campos, 2001) and thus might have influenced Freire.
4. Dewey's speech in December of 1941 is revealing when he says: 'I have nothing, had nothing, and have nothing now, to say directly about the war' (cited in Diggins, 1994, p. 1). Dewey went on to add that philosophy can neither discern the direction of events as they develop nor judge their meaning afterward.

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