

Lev Vygotsky: Unlocking the Social Origins of the Mind

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Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky (Russian: Лев Семёнович Выготский or Лев Симеонович Выгодский; November 17 1896 - June 11, 1934) was a Soviet psychologist, the founder of cultural-historical psychology, and the leader of the Vygotsky Circle.

Biography

Vygotsky was born in Orsha, in the Russian Empire (today in Belarus) into a nonreligious Jewish family. He was influenced by his cousin, David Vygotsky. He graduated from Moscow State University in 1917. In the mid-1920s, he worked at the Institute of Psychology and other educational, research, and clinical institutions in Moscow, Leningrad, and Kharkov where he extensively investigated ideas about cognitive development. He died in 1934, at the age of 37, in Moscow of tuberculosis.

Work

A pioneering psychologist, Vygotsky was also a highly prolific author: his major works span 6 volumes, written over roughly 10 years, from his *Psychology of Art* (1925) to *Thought and Language* (1934). Vygotsky's interests in the fields of developmental psychology, child development, and education were extremely diverse. The philosophical framework he provided includes not only insightful interpretations about the cognitive role of tools of mediation, but also the re-interpretation of well-known concepts in psychology such as the notion of internalization of knowledge. Vygotsky introduced the notion of zone of proximal development, an innovative metaphor capable of describing not the actual, but the potential of human cognitive development. His work covered such diverse topics as the origin and the psychology of art, development of higher mental functions, philosophy of science and methodology of psychological research, the relation between learning and human development, concept formation, interrelation between language and thought development, play as a psychological phenomenon, the study of learning disabilities, and abnormal human development (aka defectology).

Cultural Mediation and Internalization

Vygotsky investigated child development and how this was guided by the role of culture and interpersonal communication. Vygotsky observed how higher mental functions developed historically within particular cultural groups, as well as individually through social interactions with significant people in a child's life, particularly parents, but also other adults. Through these interactions, a child came to learn the habits of mind of her/his culture, including speech patterns, written language, and other symbolic knowledge through which the child derives meaning and which affected a child's construction of her/his knowledge. This key premise of Vygotskian psychology is often referred to as cultural mediation. The specific knowledge gained by children

through these interactions also represented the shared knowledge of a culture. This process is known as internalization.

Internalization can be understood in one respect as "knowing how". For example, riding a bicycle or pouring a cup of milk are tools of the society and initially outside and beyond the child. The mastery of these skills occurs through the activity of the child within society. A further aspect of internalization is appropriation, in which the child takes a tool and makes it his own, perhaps using it in a way unique to himself. Internalizing the use of a pencil allows the child to use it very much for his own ends rather than draw exactly what others in society have drawn previously.

Guided participation, which takes place when creative thinkers interact with a knowledgeable person, is practiced around the world. Cultures may differ, though, in the goals of development. For example, Mayan mothers in Guatemala help their daughters learn to weave through guided participation.

Psychology of Play

Less known is Vygotsky's research on play, or children's games, as a psychological phenomenon and its role in the child's development. Through play the child develops abstract meaning separate from the objects in the world, which is a critical feature in the development of higher mental functions.

The famous example Vygotsky gives is of a child who wants to ride a horse but cannot. If the child were under three, he would perhaps cry and be angry, but around the age of three the child's relationship with the world changes: "Henceforth play is such that the explanation for it must always be that it is the imaginary, illusory realization of unrealizable desires. Imagination is a new formation that is not present in the consciousness of the very raw young child, is totally absent in animals, and represents a specifically human form of conscious activity. Like all functions of consciousness, it originally arises from action." (Vygotsky, 1978)

The child wishes to ride a horse but cannot, so he picks up a stick and stands astride of it, thus pretending he is riding a horse. The stick is a pivot. "Action according to rules begins to be determined by ideas, not by objects.... It is terribly difficult for a child to sever thought (the meaning of a word) from object. Play is a transitional stage in this direction. At that critical moment when a stick - i.e., an object - becomes a pivot for severing the meaning of horse from a real horse, one of the basic psychological structures determining the child's relationship to reality is radically altered".

As children get older, their reliance on pivots such as sticks, dolls and other toys diminishes. They have internalized these pivots as imagination and abstract concepts through which they can understand the world. "The old adage that 'children's play is imagination in action' can be reversed: we can say that imagination in adolescents and schoolchildren is play without action" (Vygotsky,

1978).

Another aspect of play that Vygotsky referred to was the development of social rules that develop, for example, when children play house and adopt the roles of different family members. Vygotsky cites an example of two sisters playing at being sisters. The rules of behavior between them that go unnoticed in daily life are consciously acquired through play. As well as social rules, the child acquires what we now refer to as self-regulation. For example, when a child stands at the starting line of a running race, she may well desire to run immediately so as to reach the finish line first, but her knowledge of the social rules surrounding the game and her desire to enjoy the game enable her to regulate her initial impulse and wait for the start signal.

Thought and Language

Perhaps Vygotsky's most important contribution concerns the inter-relationship of language development and thought. This concept, explored in Vygotsky's book *Thought and Language*, (alternative translation: *Thinking and Speaking*) establishes the explicit and profound connection between speech (both silent inner speech and oral language), and the development of mental concepts and cognitive awareness. It should be noted that Vygotsky described inner speech as being qualitatively different from normal (external) speech. Although Vygotsky believed inner speech developed from external speech via a gradual process of internalization, with younger children only really able to "think out loud," he claimed that in its mature form inner speech would be unintelligible to anyone except the thinker, and would not resemble spoken language as we know it (in particular, being greatly compressed). Hence, thought itself develops socially.

An infant learns the meaning of signs through interaction with its main care-givers, e.g., pointing, cries, and gurgles can express what is wanted. How verbal sounds can be used to conduct social interaction is learned through this activity, and the child begins to utilize, build, and develop this faculty, e.g., using names for objects, etc.

Language starts as a tool external to the child used for social interaction. The child guides personal behavior by using this tool in a kind of self-talk or "thinking out loud." Initially, self-talk is very much a tool of social interaction and it tapers to negligible levels when the child is alone or with deaf children. Gradually self-talk is used more as a tool for self-directed and self-regulating behavior. Then, because speaking has been appropriated and internalized, self-talk is no longer present around the time the child starts school. Self-talk "develops along a rising not a declining, curve; it goes through an evolution, not an involution. In the end, it becomes inner speech" (Vygotsky, 1987, pg 57). Inner speech develops through its differentiation from social speech.

Speaking has thus developed along two lines, the line of social communication and the line of inner speech, by which the child mediates and regulates their activity through their thoughts which in turn

are mediated by the semiotics (the meaningful signs) of inner speech. This is not to say that thinking cannot take place without language, but rather that it is mediated by it and thus develops to a much higher level of sophistication. Just as the birthday cake as a sign provides much deeper meaning than its physical properties allow, inner speech as signs provides much deeper meaning than the lower psychological functions would otherwise allow.

Inner speech is not comparable in form to external speech. External speech is the process of turning thought into words. Inner speech is the opposite; it is the conversion of speech into inward thought. Inner speech for example contains predicates only. Subjects are superfluous. Words too are used much more economically. One word in inner speech may be so replete with sense to the individual that it would take many words to express it in external speech.

Zone of Proximal Development

"Zone of proximal development" (ZPD) is Vygotsky's term for the range of tasks that a child can complete independently and those completed with the guidance and assistance of adults or more-skilled children. The lower limit of ZPD is the level of skill reached by the child working independently. The upper limit is the level of additional responsibility the child can accept with the assistance of an able instructor. The ZPD captures the child's cognitive skills that are in the process of maturing and can be accomplished only with the assistance of a more-skilled person. Scaffolding is a concept closely related to the idea of ZPD. Scaffolding is changing the level of support. Over the course of a teaching session, a more-skilled person adjusts the amount of guidance to fit the child's current performance. Dialogue is an important tool of this process in the zone of proximal development. In a dialog; a child's unsystematic, disorganized, and spontaneous concepts are met with the more systematic, logical and rational concepts of the skilled helper.

Influence in Eastern Europe

In the Soviet Union, the work of the group of Vygotsky's students known as the Kharkov School of Psychology was vital for preserving the scientific legacy of Lev Vygotsky and identifying new avenues of its subsequent development. The members of the group laid a foundation for Vygotskian psychology's systematic development in such diverse fields as the psychology of memory (P. Zinchenko), perception, sensation and movement (Zaporozhets, Asnin, A. N. Leont'ev), personality (L. Bozhovich, Asnin, A. N. Leont'ev), will and volition (Zaporozhets, A. N. Leont'ev, P. Zinchenko, L. Bozhovich, Asnin), psychology of play (G. D. Lukov, D. El'konin) and psychology of learning (P. Zinchenko, L. Bozhovich, D. El'konin), as well as the theory of step-by-step formation of mental actions (Gal'perin), general psychological activity theory (A. N. Leont'ev) and psychology of action (Zaporozhets). A. Puzyrey elaborated the ideas of Vygotsky in respect of psychotherapy and even in the broader context of deliberate psychological intervention

(psychotechnique), in general.

Critics

In the Soviet Union, the school of Vygotsky and, specifically, his cultural-historical psychology was much criticized during his lifetime as well as after his death. By the beginning of the 1930s, the school was defeated in Soviet academic and political circles by Vygotsky's "scientific" opponents who criticized him for "idealist aberrations", which at that time equaled with the charge in disloyalty to the Communist Party (and, particularly during the Stalin era, frequently entailed serious consequences not only for academic work but also in terms of potential prosecution, detention, and/or execution). As a result of this criticism of their work, a major group of Vygotsky's students including Luria and Leontiev had to flee from Moscow to Ukraine where they established the Kharkov school of psychology. Later, the representatives of the school would, in turn, in the second half of the 1930s criticize Vygotsky himself for his interest in the cross-disciplinary study of the child that was developed under the umbrella term of paedology (also spelled as pedology) as well as for his ignoring the role of practice and practical, object-bound activity and arguably his emphasis on the research on the role of language and, on the other hand, emotional factors in human development. Much of this early criticism of the 1930s was later discarded by these Vygotskian scholars themselves. Another line of the critique of Vygotsky's psychological theory comes from such major figures of the Soviet psychology as Sergei Rubinstein and his followers who criticized Vygotsky's notion of mediation and its development in the works of students.

Some critics say Vygotsky overemphasized the role of language in thinking. Also, his emphasis on collaboration and guidance has potential pitfalls if facilitators are too helpful in some cases. An example of that would be an overbearing and controlling parent. Other critics argue that some children may become lazy and expect help when they can do something on their own.