

Introduction

Reading Vygotsky: from fascination to construction

Reading Vygotsky is a fascinating enterprise. With the present reader, the availability of his works in English begins to resemble a representative sample. It can be said that over the last decade the international scholarly world has largely conquered the bastion of access to the work of that lonely socialite poet of European psychology (see Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991).

Vygotsky was an integrative thinker whose personal style matched his interests. In order to think through complicated issues, he needed to talk. And he could talk well – a literary scholar turned psychologist could captivate his listeners. That vigour of the oral speech style can be seen in his writings, many of which had Vygotsky's oral presentations (stenographed) as their origin. One can encounter long philosophical speculations which turn suddenly into recitations of poetry, or an allusion to a literary symbol. Vygotsky was not afraid of being emotional in his scientific argument, as science, after all, is a form of art.

It is perhaps exactly Vygotsky's personal speech style which has maintained his popularity within an otherwise empiricist international psychology. In contrast with the rule-following rationality (bordering upon unimaginativeness) of most modern psychology, it may be Vygotsky's flowery escapades into literature, his sharp and often arrogant looking criticism of his contemporaries, and his ability to synthesize knowledge from different sources, which keep us fascinated with his writings.

Yet it is better not to lose track of other reasons in contemporary psychology that may have made Vygotsky into a popular figure. The socio-political discourse of the international social sciences during the last decades may have been right for his sanctification in the science of child and educational psychology. In other words, can we partly explain the interest in Vygotsky on topics that were often almost directly borrowed from his contemporary psychologists?

Social construction of importance: a means of communication

It is interesting to apply Vygotsky's own idea of semiotic mediation to the process of construction of his status as a 'classic' of developmental psychology. In the course of communication about scientists in and around science, different kinds of narrative strategies are purposefully put into practice (Valsiner, 1994). A given discipline of a certain historical period gains from creating hero myths around its scientists for their own work, as well as for the public image of the discipline. Beyond that, other social institutions (which have no connections with actual interests of any science – here considered as a social institution) may elect to create myths about scientists for consumption of the mass communication system (for example, Albert Einstein in Missner, 1985).

Vygotsky's fate in the realm of socially constructed importance was as ambiguous as all of his life. Entering into the enthusiastic social construction effort of 'new psychology' in the Soviet Union in the early 1920s, he soon became dissatisfied with the dominance of highly vocal 'Marxist psychologists' who tried to solve complex psychological problems by endless referencing of Marx, Engels or Plekhanov (who was later dropped to be replaced by Lenin, Stalin and other similar great philosophers). As we described in our analysis of Vygotsky's entrance into psychology (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, chs 6 and 7), his standing was from the very beginning that of a somewhat distant yet devoted and very intelligent outsider. He went along with Kornilov's 'Marxist reactology' (even attempting some – unsuccessful – empirical research!) as long as it satisfied his intellectual quest. Of course, Vygotsky's satiation with Marxist psychology in its public and naively fascinating version was soon reached, and he located for himself work in the areas of defectology and paedology, domains where he could develop his version of innovative psychology (he was no less emphatic in understanding the value of his own quest than were his Marxist contemporaries of their declarative innovations).

However, in both defectology and paedology, Vygotsky remained somewhat distant from the core of activities in 'Soviet science'. True, he was well known, respected (especially as his speeches captivated large audiences) and active in the organization of research and its application – yet he would never be considered as important as his more socio-politically active colleagues. His small research group (see Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991) was a truly functioning collective – yet it consisted mostly of devoted students and a few co-workers. In contrast, one is reminded of the administrative activities of Konstantin Kornilov in his role as the director of the Institute of Experimental Psychology in Moscow to lead the 'construction of Marxist psychology'. And, of course, the most extraordinary contrast to Vygotsky's social standing was the never tiring energy of Vladimir Bekhterev, who since 1907 to his death in 1927 was establishing (and re-establishing) different kinds of research institute in St Petersburg (and later Leningrad), continuing through wars and revolutions with immense organizational power (and the social importance that

came and went with it). Even the hypermarxist Aron Zalkind was actively involved in the organization of psychoneurology onto 'new rails' – without much substance, yet with a revolutionary fervour.

In contrast to these activists, Vygotsky's importance was decidedly content-bound and limited to those areas of his activities that were dear to his personal goals. Thus, he was always interested in improving the practical conditions for children's education – in the case of normality or pathology. Of course, his activities were hampered by recurrent episodes of tuberculosis (and corresponding uncertainties of cure and death), and after 1930 (see Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, ch. 16) by the uncertainties about the ideological purges against 'cosmopolitanism' (of which indeed he was a good example and without any ways to hide his international connections).

All in all, Vygotsky's social importance in Soviet psychology during his lifetime was largely limited – he was known, but was not really playing a 'leadership' role. He was both Marxist (honouring some of Marx's and Engels' productive ideas) and non-Marxist (citing formalist poets and not bothering to take his contemporary Marxists seriously); he was part of the construction of 'new society' but at the same time did not embrace the proletarian revolutionary ferment.

After his death and until his name became mentionable again in the context of the Soviet Union (in 1956), Vygotsky's importance vanished (along with his main promoters A. Luria and V. Kolbanovsky, who hid from the mainstreams of Soviet psychology). Its reappearance was linked completely with transformations in Soviet society after 1956 and the active promotion of Vygotsky's name and ideas both in the Soviet Union and internationally.

It is here that a special tribute should be paid to the role of Alexander Luria in maintaining and propagating Vygotsky's ideas. In his interactive cosmopolitan way, he had made Vygotsky internationally known already at the end of the 1920s. When international connectedness for Soviet psychologists became available again after 1956 (although it was never encouraged), Luria resumed this role. In fact, it is thanks to his efforts that one of the original translations published for the first time in the present reader has become available ('Tool and Symbol'). In the early 1970s Luria, with Michael Cole's help, tried to get this published internationally, but without success. It is thanks to Michael Cole's collaboration with our present project that the work is now published in the form overseen by Luria.

However, the international community of psychologists had its own socio-political reasons for paying attention to Vygotsky. Extra-psychological factors – the Cold War and Soviet technological surprises (e.g. the 'sputnik effect', or Nikita Khrushchev's innovative use of a shoe as a diplomatic tool) – had channelled Western attention toward the mysterious Soviet 'giant' which made threatening noises and primacy claims in everything from the steam engine to the first manned space flight, and to the establishment of a free society where everybody was blissfully happy in their personal ways. The old truth of propaganda – of telling big lies as often as possible – had definitely worked in favour of the Soviet system. Even if the Western audience was sceptical about many of the Soviet claims, the latter's self-assured nature

would leave a trace of doubt (well, maybe there was something in those claims). So persisting interest was maintained, and had Vygotsky been linked with some less visible country interest in him (and in Soviet psychology at large) might never have advanced so far.

There were also a number of personal factors that contributed to Vygotsky's selection as an object of international interest. First, he died young and brilliant (and was of Jewish origin – a fact that Soviet sources persistently overlooked until it was given due attention by Levitin, 1982), which is always an asset for poets and scientists. Secondly, he was Marxist in a time when this was still considered fashionable – but not too Marxist for the Western taste. Thirdly, he was a literary scholar who turned into a psychologist, and a theoretician at a time when theory-building in international psychology had declined in favour and he thus provided a welcome alternative to existing practices. And, of course, the few glimpses the international audience received of his work were teasing modern psychology's overquantified ego.

Of course, the irony of history reveals that part of Vygotsky's ideas was not unavailable internationally even during his lifetime (see chapters 4, 5 and 11 of the present reader). But at the time international psychologists attributed no special status to a special context called 'Soviet psychology'. Psychology in the Soviet Union was justifiably viewed as internationally meaningful psychology which just happened to be done in a particular country. Similarly, Vygotsky and his more thoughtful colleagues were never building a segregated Soviet or Marxist psychology. Instead, their work was very closely intertwined with the current psychological research in Europe and North America, and special pride was given to the feeling of working at the level of the best in the world.

The recent history of international referencing of Vygotsky is provided elsewhere (see Valsiner, 1988, pp. 156–62). It reveals the prominence of the two book-format publications (*Thought and Language*, 1962; and the cocktail-type mixing of various of his ideas to fit the American audience, published as *Mind in Society* in 1978). Although the more sophisticated scholars were citing Vygotsky's journal articles alongside the two books, still the majority of references to Vygotsky in the 1970s and early 1980s is to those two books. Vygotsky became more of a name than a real scholar, he was attacked by Westerners who did not (or could not) understand him (e.g. Fodor, 1972) or, alternatively, glorified (Toulmin, 1978).

Furthermore, Vygotsky seemed to have something to say to educationalists in different Western countries. In the United States, the fashion for partial borrowing of Piaget's ideas was about to decline in the 1970s, and a new identity figure was to be created. Vygotsky's message – of the role of the 'social other' in child development (even if not original to him, nor very unusual among other sociogenetic thinkers) – fitted into American education contexts where Piaget-ascribed individual learning freedom of pupils was threatening the authority and control functions of the teachers. Remnants of the one-sided borrowing from Vygotsky of the importance of the social other can still be seen today, where educationalists continue to address issues of teacher–child cooperation in learning, and try to prove that learning with the help of

'more experienced others' is necessarily more productive than a similar activity alone. Applications of (would-be) Vygotskian ideas in US educational contexts begin to resemble some of the practices of the famous American educator John Dewey (whose role in Vygotsky's development of ideas was undoubtedly relevant), yet the Russian Jewish thinker seems to be given credit for them.

Along similar lines, countries of Western Europe took interest in Vygotsky in their own way. There as well, he was mostly seen as an educational theorist whose 'optimistic' ideas about pupils' learning potential formed the needed contrast with the 'pessimistic' ideas ventured by Piaget. These and other ideas were discovered and propagated by small groups of 'progressive' young Marxists who saw his work as providing, among other things, a foundation for a criticism of the prevailing tendency to attribute individual failure and success to genetic endowment (see Van IJzendoorn and Van der Veer, 1984). In this connection Vygotsky was seen as one of the founding fathers of a critical or dialectical psychology together with such other 'anti-establishment' psychologists as Riegel (in the US), Leont'ev (in the USSR) and Holzkamp (in Germany). It is fascinating to see how part of mainstream psychology gradually absorbed the former leftist hero and made him a common name in psychology textbooks.

All in all, by the 1980s an international fascination with Vygotsky's ideas was widespread and yet most of his texts were only appearing in Russian in first (and still incomplete) versions, not to speak of new translations into English or other international languages. Also, Vygotsky's importance was enhanced by the movement for activity theory (e.g. Wertsch, 1981). Here the interest in Leont'ev's activity theory spilt over to Vygotsky (as Leont'ev himself claimed direct heritage from Vygotsky's and Luria's cultural-historical theory – a claim much disputed and proven questionable in Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991).

Thus, Vygotsky arrived at an internationally prominent status and yet the bases for such ascent are embedded in the history of the development of (developmental) psychology and education in different countries. Fame is a socially constructed entity which functions for the purposes of the constructors, rather than for the designated bearers of that role themselves. A fitting proof of the societal construction of Vygotsky's stature is the list of ideas that the fascinated public has been persistently overlooking in the discourse about Vygotsky.

'Blind spots' in socially constructed importance

As we have shown elsewhere (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, 1992), the 'blind spots' in the understanding of Vygotsky have been rather prominent. The existence of such myopia leads one to look for the semiotic mediation used in the discourse. Fully in line with Vygotsky himself, we can claim that societal meanings are not only vehicles for remembering scientific ideas, but also (and equally effective) the means to purposefully forget some.

A number of blind spots can be detected in contemporary uses of Vygotsky's ideas. First (and foremost), it is the contemporary overlooking of Vygotsky's *intellectual interdependency with his European and American contemporaries and predecessors*. Much of our analysis of Vygotsky's ideas has been devoted to filling in this gap (see Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991). We have attempted to show that modern European and American researchers in their justified fascination with Vygotskian ideas are often dealing with extended and assimilated versions of theories that originated in their own research traditions and whose original co-founders have gone undeservedly into oblivion.

Secondly, *the focus on the individual developing person* which Vygotsky clearly had (as did most European psychologists of the time) has been persistently overlooked. Thus, Vygotsky has been presented as an irreconcilable opponent to Piaget, with whom he differed in the evaluation of egocentric speech, but not in the focus on the developing personal-cognitive (and affective) structures. The actual closeness of the basic personalistic standpoints of both, as well as to William Stern's general ideas (see Kreppner, 1992) has gone without attention. Our contemporary child and educational psychology seems to be in its socially orientated mode, within which the simple primacy of the individual's personal experiencing is yet to find its prominent place (again).

Thirdly, in the educational applications of Vygotsky a very curious oversight can be observed – *the role of the 'social other'* (teacher, more capable peer, parent, etc.) *is presented as always helpful*, concerned about the future advancement of the child, etc. The (very real) possibility that under some circumstances educational interference ahead of the present developmental possibilities (i.e. within the zone of proximal development) might be purposefully harmful, promote ignorance and be potentially detrimental in other ways, is not considered. The real world is more complex than an educational utopia, and borrowing from Vygotsky has concentrated on the latter rather than on the former. The favourite topics of investigators – mother-child 'dialogue', or teacher-students' 'collective problem solving', or any other linkage of the social context and individual performers' relations within it – are investigated in their positively hedonistic and educationally progressive flavour. It is interesting to note that nowadays countless investigators of mother-child dialogues and joint problem solving (with their emphasis on the steering role of the more experienced other in an intimate setting) feel obliged to refer to Vygotsky, although in fact Vygotsky never discussed these situations and instead focused more upon culture as providing tools for thinking.

It is clear, then, that the reception of Vygotsky's ideas in the West has been selective. In a sense this is inevitable and may even be productive: we all create our own Freud, Piaget or Vygotsky and extend their ideas according to our own insights. The case of Vygotsky is slightly different, however, as his works have not been generally available in English and (consequently) a sober appraisal of his work does not yet seem to have been made. It is here that publications like the present reader may perform a beneficial role.

The present reader: from reading to novelty construction

Our goal in putting together the present reader was to provide the interested reader with systematic access to Vygotsky's ideas in their own development. Obviously we had to make a selection and some facets of Vygotsky's creativity are not as well represented as others. For example, his literary criticism – a very important source for his psychological ideas – is not represented here. The avid reader is encouraged to dive into *The Psychology of Art* (in English: Vygotsky, 1971) for further in-depth understanding. Also, Vygotsky's defectological work has not received much prominence, as there seemed no need to replicate a major translation of exactly that side of Vygotsky's texts (Vygotsky, 1993).

These under-represented aspects of Vygotsky's creativity aside, the present reader fills in a number of prominent gaps in our knowledge. Chapter 1 gives us an insight into Vygotsky's and Luria's early evaluation of Freud's ideas which was on the whole more positive than one perhaps would expect. In chapter 5 of *Understanding Vygotsky* (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991) we have discussed Luria's prominent role in the psychoanalytic movement and the gradual change of both Vygotsky's and Luria's attitude towards Freudian theory both on internal and external grounds. In chapter 2 of this book we see the only concrete evidence of Vygotsky's first and last trip abroad: the lecture he delivered in London about the social education of deaf and dumb children. It formed the result of his organizational activities in what was called the field of 'defectology' at the time and it is fascinating to see the fervour with which Vygotsky defends the view that most important in physical 'defects' are the social results they cause for the child, results which might not be felt in another, better society. In chapter 3 we present one of Vygotsky's major theoretical papers in which he combines a sharp attack against reflexology with a plea for an objective study of consciousness. The content of this paper as well as the way it was presented during a conference in Moscow played its part in Vygotsky's entrance into academic psychology (see Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, pp. 39–47). Chapters 4, 5 and 11 present an overview of the key ideas and research methods of the cultural–historical theory as developed by Vygotsky and his associates in the late 1920s. They were published in the *Journal of Genetic Psychology* thanks to Luria's efforts and subsequently ignored by their contemporaries. In chapters 6, 9, 12 and 15 the reader may learn about the major role that Vygotsky attached to the formation of academic or scientific concepts in human cognitive development. It is a feature of Vygotsky's thinking which is known in the West, but has received rather less attention lately than such topics as the zone of proximal development. In our opinion, this is unfortunate as Vygotsky himself clearly (and perhaps incorrectly) attributed a key role to concept formation (see Van der Veer, 1992). The critical evaluation of Vygotsky's thinking, therefore, cannot do without a thorough study and critical examination of this aspect of his work. In chapter 7 we publish Vygotsky's and Luria's major paper, 'Tool and symbol in child development'. This book-length paper comprised their provisional

formulation of the main tenets of the cultural–historical theory and an overview of some of its applications to major psychological problems. In chapters 8 and 13 we get a glimpse of Vygotsky's involvement in matters of politics and ideology. We can see how he takes a clear leftist stand – sometimes fiercely attacking his opponents – without for one moment losing sight of the standards of scientific reasoning (which was quite remarkable in the Soviet Union of his time). Chapter 10 deals with an aspect of Vygotsky's thinking which has so far been generally ignored: his analysis of children's imagination and creativity. It is little known that Vygotsky wrote a book on the subject and took an avid interest in the development of children's drawings, etc. Finally, chapter 14 provides us with a fine analysis of the role of the environment in child development. It is interesting to see how Vygotsky in a very informal manner avoids some of the pitfalls that many later researchers would still fall into.

All in all, the present reader presents the interested student of education and psychology with some 250 pages of material which was never (re)published in English. Combined with the new and authoritative translations of known material and the notes provided by the editors they should allow the reader to gain a fair impression of the scientific work of Lev Vygotsky and his associates.

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