The Culture of Vygotsky

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In their introductory chapter to *The Cambridge Companion to Vygotsky* (*CCV*), editors Harry Daniels, Michael Cole, and James V. Wertsch (2007) state their goal for the volume:

> It is our intention that this book will make Vygotsky 'easier to read' by discussing his work in terms of the cultures in which [his work] arose and developed; seek to clarify aspects of the intellectual legacy that he left; and then discuss subsequent applications of this legacy. (p. 2)

That is, they view Vygotsky in light of the culture of his origins and then with respect to the culture that has evolved from the foundation he provided. Their aim is to contribute to an understanding of Vygotsky's work by contextualizing and historicizing his own career and then challenging readers to understand how his work has been taken up, and most productively could be taken up, by subsequent generations of scholars who claim his influence and further claim to apply his principles.

I say "claim" because, in the view of many who are well-read in this scholarship, assertions of a Vygotskian perspective are often tenuous at best. I too often see references to selected sections of *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978) that do not suggest a richer reading or consideration of either his own more extensive writing or the body of work produced by people conversant with his career project. Vygotsky sought to resolve the crisis of fragmentation that he saw in the psychology of his day. The crisis remains, as evidenced by the abundance of psychologies and their different foci available in the 21st century. Vygotsky's solution was to propose and lay the foundation for a comprehensive psychology of human concept development. His ambitious plan included three central facets: It was fundamentally genetic (i.e., developmental), it relied on the premise that frameworks for thinking are social in origin and are internalized through cultural practice, and it used the axiom that mental processes are mediated by tools and signs (Wertsch, 1985b). Wertsch summarized a Vygotskian perspective as being concerned with human concept development as volitional, goal-directed, tool-mediated action in cultural context.

Vygotsky has been cited to account for learning and development in many scholarly fields. Wells (1999) numbers among many who are concerned that these citations are often ill informed. He has commented (referenced in del Río and Álvarez's chapter in *CCV*) that the often-invoked zone of proximal development (ZPD)

> is the only aspect of Vygotsky's genetic theory of human development that most teachers have ever heard of and, as a result, it is not infrequently cited to justify forms of teaching that seem quite incompatible with the theory as a whole. (p. 313; cf. Smagorinsky, 2007)

I would say that researchers are at least as guilty of these trivial applications of Vygotsky as are teachers. I regard this superficial referencing by researchers as a more serious problem in that they have time to think more carefully about their work than overburdened teachers and so should take more seriously their responsibility to read their sources and their attendant scholarship with care. When a theoretical source is used more as a means of membership in a club than to advance a point—as I think is too often the case with citations to Vygotsky—then the reference strikes me as, at best, disingenuous, and at worst, unethical.

Reading extensively in Vygotskian scholarship seems critical to referencing him knowledgeably, given the challenges that Vygotsky's writing presents to the 21st-century reader. Daniels, Cole, and Wertsch's *Cambridge Companion* stands as an important contribution to this scholarship. It is similar in quality to Wertsch's (1985a) edited volume *Culture, Communication, and Cognition: Vygotskian Perspectives*, which was the first book I read when initially trying to understand Vygotsky in the early 1990s. I make this comparison because the editors

of both collections have assembled an impressive set of international authors with expertise on this topic, and because the chapters in both volumes are written to focus on a specific aspect of a Vygotskian perspective and explicate it as a way to illuminate issues important to Vygotsky's larger project.

The roster of authors is impressive, representing nine nations and including chapters by a distinguished group of Vygotskian scholars: René van der Veer, David Bakhurst, Anne Edwards, Dorothy Holland and William Lachicotte, Vera John-Steiner, Boris Meshcheryakov, James Wertsch, Michael Cole and Natalia Gajdamaschko, Vladimir Zinchenko, Mariane Hedegaard, Pablo del Río and Amelia Álvarez, Harry Daniels, Alex Kozulin and Boris Gindis, and Yrjö Engeström. Of the 14 chapters, at least half are written by people either native to Russia or fluent in the language (Van der Veer, Bakhurst, Meshcheryakov, Wertsch, Cole and Gajdamaschko, Zinchenko, and Kozulin and Gindis). Others are written by European-origin scholars who have read Vygotsky in two or more languages.

The inclusion of many Russian-speaking contributors is among the qualities of this volume. Even those whom I consider to be conversant with Vygotsky's original writing—those whose publications are rife with references to works of Vygotsky that are only available in Russian—are cautious about their grasp of both the language and the concepts. Michael Cole, who has spoken Russian for many decades and who lived in the former Soviet Union during his internship with A.R. Luria, wrote that "I have been writing jointly with Natalia [Gajdamaschko] precisely because I feel so strongly the need for more than simple translation help in dealing with the meta-psychology and national ethos that is the relevant context for understanding the local words" (M. Cole, personal communication, June 26, 2008). James Wertsch, who speaks to Russians in Russian and has translated Vygotsky into English, also backs off from claims that his knowledge of Russian is fluent (J. Wertsch, personal communication, July 3, 2008).

I wish that more people shared Cole's and Wertsch's humility in seeking greater expertise in an area in which they have long been among the world's foremost scholars. Instead, what I see too often are "drive-by" references to Vygotsky's work. I have come across the ZPD in accounts of teaching and learning without attention to their cultural and historical dimensions—a central feature of a ZPD analysis. I have also seen Vygotsky's concern for the importance of "play" stretched to imply that Vygotsky believed that learning should be "fun." And yet, as Hedegaard argues in her *CCV* chapter, Vygotsky's notion of play refers to experimental activity designed to create possibilities and not to the idea that learning should involve merriment.

Vygotsky, from what I can gather, was not a fun guy but rather an extraordinarily intense and formidably brilliant man. References to his work that do not take into account his larger project ought to be severely reviewed and critiqued. That is, if the ZPD is invoked without attention to issues of culture, intersubjectivity, the historical role of tool-mediated action in the setting of teaching and learning, and other issues that tie his ideas together, then any reader ought to view the reference with skepticism. Otherwise, as is now the case, Vygotsky's work will continue to be treated superficially and misappropriated to suit authors' purposes and not to advance scholarship within the framework of his ideas. The *CCV* numbers among those publications that will inform and stimulate readers who hope to link Vygotsky's work to their own, and to do so with fidelity to his larger conception of human development.

The extent to which this book will be of interest to readers of *Reading Research Quarterly* (*RRQ*) is probably a separate question from whether this book meets its own goals. As the editors' statement of purpose reveals, the *CCV* is concerned with Vygotsky broadly speaking rather than with Vygotsky as he applies to reading or literacy research. Indeed, reading or literacy researchers who hope to see themselves or their friends referenced here will likely be disappointed. Although there are brief references to Leander's (2002) attention to identity artifacts, Lee's (2000) cultural modeling, Gutierrez's (Gutierrez & Stone, 2000) work on the third space, and Palincsar and Brown's (1984) reciprocal teaching, these constructs are used in service of broader points rather than serving as central points themselves. Of these, only reciprocal teaching merits an index listing. If this volume is to inform the work of reading or literacy researchers, then they need to seek a broader understanding of the full-blown Vygotskian project. I submit that researchers who hope to make any real sense of Vygotsky in relation to their own work need to take this richer perspective.

I next focus on the contents of Daniels et al.'s (2007) collection by considering the themes that I see recurring across the chapters. Undoubtedly, I will overlook important issues that other readers might themselves foreground in considering this volume's contributions to Vygotskian scholarship. What I offer here is a set of themes that I have found compelling and that have advanced or sharpened my own thinking in relation to Vygotsky's career project and, for that matter, my own. That many other angles are available and could be emphasized suggests the richness of this volume and what it has to offer those who seek a clearer understanding of both Vygotsky's own career and the many lines of research that have followed from the framework he provided.

The Context for Vygotsky's Work

The authors of *CCV*'s chapters contextualize and historicize Vygotsky's career and work routinely throughout their essays. They argue for a reciprocal conception of context, one that takes into account the etymology of *context* as derived from *contexere*, meaning "weaving together" (see Cole, 1996). Vygotsky, then, although a product of his times, also helped to produce his times. This sense of situated agency is critical to understanding a Vygotskian perspective, which relies on the premise that thinking is social in origin yet is not fatalistic about the implications of this condition for how individuals may potentially act on their environments.

Each author yields insights into Vygotsky's thinking and how the setting of his life and work contributed to the trajectory his ideas took. The editors caution readers that

> Each author in this volume is engaging in an act of interpretation that is constitutive of our own context as Vygotsky's life and work were constitutive of his. We emphasize these complicating circumstances because recognition of these circumstances should help us to ward off the temptation to arrive at a single truth about the man, ideas, and events about which we write. (p. 4)

Although, then, clarifying much about Vygotsky, this volume also implores readers to recognize the interpretive task that awaits anyone who hopes to become involved in appropriating his perspective in their own scholarly work.

Vygotsky was born in 1896 and died of tuberculosis, which afflicted him throughout his adult life, in 1934. His magnum opus, *Thinking and Speech*, was published the year he died; he dictated sections from his sickbed, no doubt contributing to the text's notorious difficulty (see Zinchenko, *CCV*). When he was 21 years old, the Bolsheviks overthrew the Russian Provisional Government, and the Russian Civil War from 1917 to 1922 resulted in the creation of the Soviet Union in 1924. Vygotsky's mercurial ascension into the upper echelon of Soviet psychologists in this era was quite remarkable given his youth, his outsider status as a native of Belarus, and his Jewish heritage within the hierarchical and Balkanized social structure of Soviet life (see Kotik-Friedgut & Friedgut, 2008, for an account of Jewish influences on Vygotsky's worldview). He began his career as a teacher and, in 1925, completed and published his doctoral dissertation, translated as *The Psychology of Art*. His decade-long career as a psychologist, then, took place concurrent with the launch of the Soviet Union and its foundation in a highly centralized Marxist philosophy.

The Soviet system has long been known for its brutal reinforcement of its ideology, and in its early days and through at least the 1950s monitored its psychologists with a vengeance (see Cole, Levitin, & Luria, 2006). Because of the excessive role he identified for individual development in social context, says Zinchenko, "Vygotsky's commitment to Marxist beliefs did not save him from criticism. His works were banned, denounced, and declared to be vicious and even evil. He was lucky to have managed to die in his own bed in 1934" (*CCV*, p. 213). Others, however, were not so fortunate to die of natural causes. In *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky did not reference Gustav Gustavovich Shpet, one of his mentors. *CCV* contributors conclude that Vygotsky likely avoided acknowledging Shpet because he did not wish to bring upon himself the fate of Shpet himself, who was dismissed from his academic positions on multiple occasions and subjected to "brutal interrogation and execution in 1937" by Soviet authorities (Wertsch, *CCV*, p. 184) due to his "freedom and dignity and the independence of his thought from Marxist–Leninist ideology, which at the time was growing stronger and stronger" (Zinchenko, *CCV*, p. 212). Shpet's literary contemporary Mandel'shtam, notes Zinchenko, met the fate of Soviets, no matter how seemingly benign their field of endeavor, who in any way defied the party position: He "perished in the Gulag a year after Shpet's murder" (*CCV*, p. 231).

Vygotsky's death coincided with harshly punitive edicts issuing from Soviet leaders. The Pedology Decree of 1936 banned both prior and future work in the area of pedology, the study of child development (Shmeleva, 2002), which was the general area in which Vygotsky's work fell. It is no coincidence that the Great Purge or Great Terror, in which Stalin took repression and persecution to astonishing new levels, began the following year. The Decree declared pedology to be "false science," eliminated university departments in the field, and dismissed or arrested its scientists.

Ewing (2001) pointed out that the Decree was designed to purge the thinking that had produced tracking in Soviet schools through the assessment and classification of students by segregating students according to results of formal assessments. According to Ewing,

> the Central Committee charged that pedologists' "pseudo-scientific experiments" had called excessive attention to "the most negative influences and pathological perversions" in children, their families, and surrounding environment. Such testing meant that "an ever larger and larger number of children" were assigned to special schools after being categorized as "mentally backward," "defective," or "difficult." In fact, the Central Committee declared, many of these children were perfectly capable of attending *normal'naia shkola* (normal schools), but once these labels had been affixed, they were considered "hopeless" cases. (p. 480)

So far, so good: The 21st-century reader might easily see these charges as quite reasonable and in accord with

current critiques of tracked schools, especially by those working from a Marxist perspective (e.g., Apple, 1982).

Yet other agendas were at work. Political leaders, Ewing (2001) noted, were concerned that pedologists were "displaying 'pedological distortions,' succumbing to 'class-hostile elements,' and engaging in 'wrecking' activity with 'anti-Leninist' objectives" (p. 472), suggesting that the welfare of children was viewed and interpreted within the framework of the state's ideology. The Decree's recommendations, he found, were made as part of a broader move toward more repressive policies and government intervention in both science and daily life in the Soviet Union. This shift was no doubt influenced by the paranoid and nativist response to the rise of Nazis in neighboring Germany, the regime's effort to find a scapegoat for shortcomings of the Soviet school system, and a rise in esteem for the proletariat accompanied by a distrust of "elite" intellectuals, many of whom found themselves suddenly and fatefully threatened in Soviet life. Ewing continued:

> The Central Committee went beyond these complaints about school policies, however, by charging that pedological theory itself was based on "falsely-scientific and anti-Marxist foundations." In particular, any suggestion that children's fate was "determined" by "fixed" social or biological factors was condemned as directly contradictory to "socialist development," which had "successfully re-educated people." Such claims about environmental and hereditary influences allegedly revealed an "uncritical" borrowing of "bourgeois" theories intended to maintain the dominant positions of "exploiting classes" and "superior races" by perpetuating the "physical and spiritual doom of the working classes and 'inferior races.'" (p. 480)

In this climate, reading Vygotsky and his colleagues was forbidden almost immediately following his death; indeed, the translation of *Thought and Language* into English in 1962 predated its availability in the Soviet Union by a dozen years. Kozulin and Gindis note, "For political reasons, any open discussion of Vygotsky's ideas was practically impossible from 1936 to the late 1950s" (*CCV*, p. 334), and Daniels reports that Vygotsky's book *Pedagogical Psychology* was considered to be so politically unacceptable to the rulers of the Soviet state that one had to have a special pass from the KGB that would admit one to the restricted reading room in the Lenin Library where the book could be read (*CCV*, p. 307).

Vygotsky no doubt embraced much about Marxism but not enough to suit the state. The environment of fear in which psychologists of his day worked, in which ideology always trumped science, surely helped to shape his writing, no matter how courageous he might have been in challenging the orthodoxies of his day—challenging the work, for instance, of Pavlov, the reigning titan. Readers might see some similarities between government intervention in science in the Soviet Union

and George W. Bush's America; and yet I can write this essay without fear of being brutally interrogated and executed or sent to the Gulag, although I hear that they now have vacancies at Guantanamo Bay.

In addition to taking into account the political realities of his day, the contributors to *CCV* interpret Vygotsky by placing his work in the context of thinkers whose work he drew on to formulate his own ideas. This effort has two primary benefits: It helps readers to learn about Russian scholars who are little known to English-language readers, and it helps to locate Vygotsky's work within the theoretical, methodological, and ontological streams that flowed through his research.

Van der Veer notes that "That Vygotsky was rescued from oblivion and Basov remains relatively unknown... demonstrates Clio's capricious nature" (*CCV*, p. 39). As Van der Veer's reference to the Greek muse of history suggests, Vygotsky's current fame and influence, although largely a function of the quality of his ideas, are also a consequence of his work having been kept alive by his colleagues, particularly A.R. Luria, during the Pedology Decree and ultimately revived for translation and publication following the death of Stalin. Others were less fortunate. The contributors to *CCV* help to acknowledge their role in Soviet psychology and broaden our understanding of the complex lineage of thinkers of which Vygotsky was a part.

The chapters by Van der Veer and Zinchenko most specifically address psychologists and other scientific thinkers who influenced Vygotsky's work. Van der Veer provides a categorical review of Russians whose research contributed to the paradigms that Vygotsky entered and ultimately refined or shattered entirely: Pavlov, Bekhterev, Chelpanov, and others. Zinchenko focuses more specifically on G.G. Shpet, whose legacy benefits from Zinchenko's detailed treatment. These reviews disinter the reputations of overlooked scholars and help to provide a heritage consisting not merely of names but of the intertext of ideas that run through Vygotsky's work. These chapters complement well the Russian and Soviet scholarship that has been published in English in the journal *Soviet Psychology*, renamed the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* following the fall of the Soviet Union.

Both Bakhurst and Wertsch situate Vygotsky in broad philosophical streams of thought. Bakhurst's goal is "to defend the view that Vygotsky's legacy should be set against the tradition of philosophical rationalism," which provided for Vygotsky his "Eurocentrism and his linear vision of historical progress" (*CCV*, p. 74). His chapter serves as a defense of Vygotsky's rationalism and its distinctively Western ways of thinking. In his chapter, Bakhurst contrives a dialogue between his own view that Vygotsky's rationalism was critical to his perspective and the antirationalist's view that "the

fecundity of Vygotsky's insights depends on liberating them from this rationalist perspective, which, it is claimed, has a deleterious, indeed reactionary, influence on his thought" (*CCV*, p. 51). Rather than finding these rationalist premises to be disabling, Bakhurst argues that through his formulation, Vygotsky worked within both their constraints and affordances to produce his account of human development. He was no doubt a product of his time and place; just as he was by necessity a Marxist, he was by culture a rationalist. Bakhurst finds that this orientation provided Vygotsky, powered by his formidable intellect, with the tools he needed to synthesize a complex host of ideas into a psychology that took on the crisis of fragmentation that he found in the field of his day.

Wertsch focuses on Vygotsky's inconsistent account of the construct of mediation, a central dimension of his account of human development. *Mediation* in general refers to the role of signs and tools (or, in Cole's, 1996, parlance, artifacts) in both internalization and externalization in human transactions with their social settings. For Vygotsky, the primary mediational means for humans is speech. Listening to and engaging in speech with cultural elders and veterans is what provides a person with a worldview and the specific language through which to characterize it, allows for new ideas to emerge through the process of expression and articulation, enables the development of signs that embody concepts, and provides the means through which people communicate with others and act upon their worlds. Wertsch (1991) and others have since expanded the cultural tool kit to include a host of nonverbal mediational means (cf. Smagorinsky, 2001), with the recognition that, as Luria maintained, speech remains the "tool of tools" (Cole, 1996, p. 108).

Wertsch argued that the inconsistencies he finds in Vygotsky's account of mediation follow from Vygotsky's simultaneous grounding in what appear to be contradictory ontologies in European thought: one that produces "explicit" mediation (through observable means) and one that produces "implicit" mediation (through intangible means). These perspectives follow from what Wertsch (2000) has called "designative" or Enlightenment (or what Bakhurst calls "rationalist") traditions, and "expressivist" or Romantic traditions, both of which had influenced European thought for centuries at the time of Vygotsky's career. Although Wertsch (2000) has argued previously that Vygotsky seemed unaware of this contradiction and never resolved it, in his *CCV* chapter he looks for more synthesis, arguing that

> the two forms of mediation can be seen as part of a larger theoretical framework when one considers some commonalities in the way he treated these forms. In particular, he viewed both forms of mediation under the general dictum that sign meaning develops. (p. 191)

A Vygotskian perspective requires seeing each act deeply in light of the intertextual and intercontextual history that has produced the moment. I have focused on key mediators that helped to shape Vygotsky's thinking. Other authors include attention to the mediational ideas that served as contours for Vygotsky's views. This archaeological work is an important contribution of *CCV* in that it helps readers to understand both individual thinkers who provided Vygotsky with inspiration and foil and broader ideological factors that inescapably contributed to his own development as a citizen and scholar.

Familiar Vygotskian Themes and One That Is Not So Familiar

Several authors explore what I consider to be familiar Vygotskian themes, not simply reviewing them but pushing themselves to gain new insights through their analyses. These chapters include those by John-Steiner on thinking and speech, Cole and Gajdamaschko on the notion of culture, Hedegaard on concept development, del Río and Álvarez on the ZPD, and Daniels on pedagogical implications of a Vygotskian perspective. The volume also includes Kozulin and Gindis's chapter on Vygotsky's work with children having special needs, which may be less familiar to the casual reader of his work. It is impossible to do justice to these chapters in a brief review, given the rich range of topics they cover and the wisdom they offer. I will attempt, however, to provide a few generalizations on the basis of my readings of these chapters.

Those well-read in Vygotskian scholarship should not be surprised to see these topics foregrounded in a "companion" to Vygotsky. For most readers, the constructs of culture, the ZPD, and so on are common fare. Indeed, one might wonder why they need extended treatment in this volume, given the attention they have already received in so many publications. Their enduring status as staples of a Vygotskian perspective, however, suggests both their importance in his theory and the degree to which they benefit from continual reconsideration.

There are many reasons for the need for ongoing analysis and explication of these constructs. First, Vygotsky was not entirely consistent in the ways in which he used his terms. Wertsch, as noted, found that Vygotsky used the notion of mediation as grounded in two conflicting traditions. Cole and Gajdamaschko further note that Vygotsky used *culture* in three distinct ways: as artistic and creative processes and products, as mediational means in human mentation, and as a term to characterize groups of people who have produced particular sorts of rationalist artifacts considered more

"advanced" than the means developed by "primitive" people—a sort of cultural judgment that seems out of synch with Vygotsky's other conceptions of culture (see Smagorinsky, 1995). Knowing the implications of each definition helps "reduce the incidence of bogus disagreement as we seek to harness Vygotsky's conceptual system," as Wertsch urges in hoping that the arguments in this volume clarify problems that follow from shallow readings of Vygotsky (*CCV*, p. 192).

What these chapters ultimately impress on me is the need to acknowledge that a Vygotskian perspective requires seeing each act deeply in relation to the cultural and historical practices of which it is a part. As I have reviewed, the authors in this collection endeavor to situate and historicize Vygotsky's work; not only in those I have featured thus far but in every chapter in the volume. Understanding Vygotsky depends on the sort of contextualization that permeates *CCV*'s chapters, and interpreting events using a Vygotskian perspective in turn requires a cultural–historical framework. The chapter by del Río and Álvarez on the ZPD is instructive in this regard. Too often, the ZPD is construed as an ahistorical instructional dyad. Yet for a Vygotskian analysis to have any relevance, the culture of the setting needs to be taken into account, including the ways in which the mediational tools emphasized in the interaction have a cultural value in the traditions and conventions that govern the setting. Overlooking that history, and focusing only on the elder or veteran and the learner, ignores the ways in which the various participants ascribe value to the means of mediation and bring prior ways of thinking and acting to their interaction.

I could provide this sort of elaboration for any of the chapters that I include in this section, yet would undoubtedly wear out my welcome with *RRQ* readers in doing so. My point is that, even if you have read extensively in these areas, you will find much to consider in these chapters. My own copy of *CCV* is thoroughly marked and underlined, even in areas in which I think I have some understanding. The issues, however, are too complex and challenging for me to have learned them once and for all through prior reading. Additional perspectives and insights offered through these chapters are available to those who believe that their knowledge, no matter how great, can be further extended and their thinking further stimulated by engaging with the ideas of other scholars considering the same texts and questions.

Although the ZPD has become virtually synonymous with Vygotsky, his work in the field of "defeklologija," translated as "defectology," is no doubt less familiar. The subject of defectology is the focus of Volume 2 of the *Collected Works* (Vygotsky, 1993) and also serves as the topic of Kozulin and Gindis's contribution to *CCV*. Readers might cringe at the archaic notion that children

with special needs are defective, yet that was the prevailing conception at the time. Kozulin and Gindis locate this perspective in the "mechanistic mentality of the 1920s that explicitly compared human beings with mechanisms" (*CCV*, p. 333), with the attendant belief that malfunctions can be diagnosed and corrected. The term covered a wide radius of conditions, including impairments in hearing, seeing, and speaking and what was termed "mental retardation." Vygotsky's work over the course of his career further considered the treatment and education of children from a broader range of nonnormative makeups.

This interest was initially pragmatic. Given the "unmerciful reality of everyday life in his hometown of Gomel during the civil war (1918–1922)" (*CCV*, p. 332) that made existence precarious, the young Vygotsky, a 1917 graduate of Moscow University, took a teaching position in 1918 that enabled him to pursue his interests in literature and the humanities. He soon gravitated to the Gomel Teacher Training College and became director of its psychological laboratory, an assignment that involved developing methods of psychological evaluation and supervising their administration in schools. At the end of the civil war, he relocated to Moscow and began an affiliation with the Section of Abnormal Children in the People's Commissariat of Education and ultimately founded the Medical-Pedagogic Laboratory for the Study of Abnormal Children, which remains in place today as the Institute of Corrective Pedagogy.

Kozulin and Gindis relate that Vygotsky's career-long concern with special-needs children began in the early Soviet Union when their numbers included the many orphans and traumatized children who survived the civil war. Their chapter makes clear a central idea in Vygotsky's approach to children who fell outside the normal range of functioning. Rather than taking the mechanistic approach that children with special needs were defective and could be fixed, Vygotsky viewed the question of their condition "as a sociocultural rather than an organic or individual developmental phenomenon" (*CCV*, p. 334). Kozulin and Gindis find that

> [t]he essence of Vygotsky's approach to remedial education is in addressing the secondary disability, that is, by countering the negative social consequences of the primary disability. Vygotsky believed that physical and mental impairment could be overcome by creating alternative but essentially equivalent roads for cultural development. By acquiring the psychological tools, disabled children transform their natural abilities into higher mental functions as do their nondisabled peers. (*CCV*, p. 345)

To Vygotsky, rather than "fixing" the "defect" in the child, an educator should strive to minimize or eliminate any environmental factors that could amplify the effects of the original point of concern. I imagine that

this effort might focus on diminishing whatever stigmas follow from being different; that is, it might attempt to educate people in the setting about how to view those with nonnormative physical or mental makeups and treat them respectfully and in light of their potential. A second approach would be to broaden the sign-and-tool systems available for mediation. Again, this tack would require changes in the environment so that new tools become sanctioned, and new approaches to assessment become available to allow for alternative paths to performance.

What I find so striking about Vygotsky's work in this area is how fresh and relevant it sounds in the context of 21st-century schooling. Children of difference still face negative social consequences of their conditions that lead to what Vygotsky called "secondary disabilities," which in the long term might trouble them more than the source of difference itself. The solution is to change the setting: to change perceptions, to allow for unconventional ways of thinking and acting, and to otherwise construct a more supportive and empathic context for children's development. The modern movement toward inclusion has made progress toward this end. That Vygotsky was among the originators of this movement and that his contributions are generally overlooked speaks to the breadth of his achievement and the depths of reading that await anyone who wishes to claim an informed perspective on his research.

Problems in Translation

At present, there is a wealth of Vygotskian texts available to the English-language reader: six volumes of collected works in publication, additional books from his oeuvre available, key texts subjected to multiple translations, and a major project now underway in Russia to make his entire output available to English-language readers. Yet, Vygotsky remains a complex figure and difficult scholar to grasp, and for a variety of reasons. In his "Translator's Foreword and Acknowledgements" to *The Collected Works, Volume 3*, René van der Veer (1997) says,

> I have not attempted to improve Vygotsky's style of writing although it was at times difficult to refrain from doing so. It is clear that Vygotsky...never rewrote a text for the sake of improving its style and readability. Hence the redundancy, the difficulty to follow the thread of his argument, the awkward sentences, etc. (p. v)

Meshcheryakov notes that Vygotsky produced 190 works within the 10-year span that comprised his career, many of which "were written very quickly, in almost telegraphic style. Some works remain unfinished. It is certainly possible that some of the works that were

published posthumously were not yet intended for publication" (*CCV*, p. 155). Daniels et al. note that

> It is difficult to reconcile some of the writing from the early 1920s with that which was produced during the last 2 years of his life. These rapid changes, coupled with the fact that his work was not published in chronological order, make synthetic summaries of his work difficult. (*CCV*, p. 2)

So in addition to the inherent difficulty of the ideas Vygotsky produced, his rendering of them make for challenging reading, no matter how well-prepared the reader is.

Even those with extraordinary fluency in Vygotsky's work typically consult others to help with their understanding. Van der Veer, a native of the Netherlands, relates in his translator's introduction to the *Collected Works, Volume 3* that "After I had translated the whole volume [from Russian to English] I carefully checked my translation against the German and Spanish translations of the same volume" (1997, p. v). With five languages at play in his effort to translate Vygotsky's already-difficult prose and concepts (German, Spanish, Russian, English, and Dutch), Van der Veer further enlisted feedback from a host of colleagues (mostly European) to amend Vygotsky's "sloppy" approach to citation by providing appropriate references and footnotes to add depth to the text.

Van der Veer's (1997) meticulous approach to rendering Vygotsky into English suggests one key lesson to be learned from reading Vygotsky with insight: that claims to understanding or implementing his ideas must be undertaken with care and caution. I refer again to Van der Veer's work in underscoring the importance of reading more than just excerpts (or summaries of excerpts) from *Mind in Society* in claiming a Vygotskian perspective. In a review of an Italian translation of *Thinking and Speech* that postdates any version of the text available in English, Van der Veer (1992) makes the remarkable observation that

> [u]nfortunately, neither in English nor in any other language has a reliable republication of *Thought and Language* been available. Leaving aside the questions that can be raised concerning the original Soviet 1934 edition (Vygotsky did not see the book in print and the editor, Kolbanovsky, changed some of the wordings to make the book more palatable for the ideological leaders), we know that the later 1956 and 1982 Soviet editions were marred by many mistakes and plain falsifications. All of the existing translations into English, or any other language, took these unreliable later editions as their point of departure. As a result, readers unable to read Russian or find a copy of the original 1934 edition have had, until now, no authoritative text of *Thought and Language* available. (p. 83; cf. Van der Veer, 1987, for a critical review of Kozulin's, 1986, translation of *Thought and Language* [Vygotsky, 1934/1986], which to Van der Veer is more properly translated as *Thinking and Speech*)

I am impressed that Van der Veer is now sufficiently fluent in at least six languages to read Vygotsky and then make this judgment; I am alarmed that he nonetheless states that "Vygotsky obviously preferred principled opponents, such as Pavlov, who made their own original contribution to science and invented their own scientific vocabulary to mediocre university professors, such as the present writer, who can only summarize what others have "discovered" (*CCV*, p. 37). After reading that Van der Veer regards himself as a relative mediocrity, I cringe yet further when I realize that even though I have been referencing Vygotsky in my own work for about 15 years, I probably am basing my understanding on questionable translations. It becomes important, then, for me and no doubt others to read the work of Vygotskian scholars who have read his Russian texts to develop a clearer grasp of the ideas that I am drawing on.

Tensions Between the Individual and the Collective

A Marxist perspective emphasizes the collective, as might be expected of a philosophy that guided the Soviet Union. In contrast, the United States has from its founding celebrated the rights of individuals (selectively, of course, given the many years that it took for full citizenship to be extended to women, people of color, and others outside the dominant mainstream). This tension between a focus on the individual and on the collective remains at work in taking a Vygotskian perspective, an issue that emerges from reading across the chapters in *CCV*.

As Bakhurst notes,

Despite his emphasis on the sociocultural foundations of psychological development, Vygotsky's thought remains centered on the individual subject conceived as a discrete, autonomous self. A cultural-historical approach, however, ought rightly to stress the dialogical character of the self. We do not just become persons through our interaction with others; we are ourselves only in relation to others. (*CCV*, p. 63)

Three chapters in particular work within this tension between the individual and the collective, although not entirely explicitly. Holland and Lachicotte compare and contrast Vygotsky with U.S. sociologist George Herbert Mead, who numbered among the pragmatists at the University of Chicago and whose work resonates with Vygotsky's in many ways. Holland and Lachicotte focus on issues of identity, situating identify formation within its sociocultural context. I see their work falling within the lines of my reading of Vygotsky's project: to understand how individuals learn to think as a consequence of their activity in social transactions, which themselves are situated in cultural and historical practices for solving the problems presented by specific environments (see Tulviste, 1991, for an extended exploration of this issue).

This focus on the individual internalization of frameworks for thinking through engagement with societal veterans and elders and their means of mediation contributed to Vygotsky's ultimate suppression following his death. As Holland and Lachicotte describe it, people

develop a higher order psychological function—an identity—which personalizes a set of collectively developed discourses about a type and cultivates, in interaction with others, a set of embodied practices that signify the person. They creatively direct the sets of collective meanings to their selves. Through this orchestration, they come to be able to organize and narrate themselves in practice in the name of an identity, and thus achieve a modest form of agency. (*CCV*, p. 134)

Their emphasis, like that of Vygotsky, is to understand the individual as a product of the goal-directed, tool-mediated action through which they engage with other members of a particular culture.

Edwards, like Holland and Lachicotte, focuses on Mead as a way to think about Vygotsky. What struck me in reading her chapter is the ways in which the disciplinary frameworks taken by Mead and Vygotsky directed their attention to different aspects of the development of mind. Vygotsky, as a psychologist, gravitated toward the individual mind and its tool-mediated processes. Mead, as a sociologist, was focused "not so much on the mechanics as on the outcomes" (Edwards, *CCV*, p. 89). Interestingly, the primary culture that directed their attention was not nationality but scholarly domain; that is, the American Mead looked at collective social processes, whereas the Soviet Vygotsky looked at mind in society. Undoubtedly their predispositions led them to one field and not the other. Their work in their respective fields, however, led them to different foci while accepting many of the same premises.

Engeström takes a different perspective on Vygotsky. Rather than focusing on Vygotsky's emphasis on the individual's development in social context, he takes up Leontiev's (1981) shift to collective action as his unit of analysis. Cole and Gajdamaschko note that

It is certainly plausible that Leontiev, like many others, sought to distance himself from ideas and associations that had led to the deaths of colleagues and friends. However, given the evidence, it seems more plausible to see his reformulation as an effort to place mediation in its cultural context. (*CCV*, p. 206)

through his shift to what is now known as *activity theory*, a view that foregrounds the collective rather

than the individual. Either to save his skin under the brutal totalitarianism of Stalinist Russia or because he genuinely embraced a more absolute Marxist perspective, Leontiev was less concerned with individuals and more focused on collectives and their joint activity. This Marxist strain of Vygotsky's project becomes amplified in Engeström's claim to being the true inheritor of the activity theory, unlike those such as Wertsch whom he classifies as pursuing a sociocultural theory of mind rather than a true application of activity theory as outlined by Leontiev (Engeström & Miettinen, 1999).

Engeström's chapter in *CCV* details his Change Laboratory, an intervention used in Finnish workplaces in which groups of employees use Engeström's activity triangle among other artifacts as a means to improving how they work together toward a common goal. This triangle has become a ubiquitous slide or overhead at countless conference presentations I have attended and numerous articles published in U.S. and international journals. And yet I do not see in U.S. research, for the most part, its relevance to the issues under study, which tend to lean more toward analyses of situated individuals than investigations of group processes. In my view, the activity triangle, much like the oft-trivialized ZPD of recent years, has become for many a means of affiliation with a fashionable theory rather than a conceptual tool for conducting a rigorous activity analysis that follows from Leontiev's move in focus from the individual to the collective.

From a cultural perspective, I see activity theory being a much more productive heuristic for scholars working in relatively socialistic societies, such as Engeström's Finland, than in overtly competitive capitalist nations, such as the United States. I seriously question the degree to which activity theory, at least as advocated by Engeström, genuinely frames the majority of studies for which it is invoked in the United States. I have fallen into this trap myself (sans the triangle) by claiming an activity theory perspective for research that looks at individual internalization and externalization rather than collective action; my critique here applies to my own work as much as it applies to anyone else's.

Bakhurst concludes that "Vygotsky's brilliance is that he sees both the significance of autonomy and how we owe our status as autonomous selves to history, culture, and society" (*CCV*, p. 74). How researchers situate themselves in relation to the reciprocal processes involved in this dynamic ought to help them claim the appropriate stance and terminology with which they position their work. The conceptual importance of terminology is explored by Meshcheryakov in his *CCV* chapter, even if he does not explicitly take up this point. His analysis, however, suggests the importance of using appropriate terms and understanding their conceptual

significance, an area in which literacy researchers have had inconsistent success in taking up Vygotsky's work.

The Ephemeral Quality of Vygotsky's Conception of Mind

Bakhurst makes the point that "Vygotsky's brilliant portrait of the mind's place in nature far outruns the empirical data that prompted it…. [H]is legacy endures as a kind of prolegomenon to empirical psychology rather than an instance of it" (*CCV*, p. 57). Meshcheryakov further quotes Vygotsky as claiming that, even as death approached, he had not yet fully defined his own terms, nor need he. Vygotsky wrote,

> One might think that, in exploring the question of higher mental functions, it is necessary to begin by giving a clear definition of higher mental functions and indicating what criteria enable us to distinguish them from elementary functions. But it seems to me that a precise definition is not something that belongs to the beginning phase of scientific knowledge. Instead, I believe I can limit myself initially merely to empirical and heuristic definitions. (Vygotsky, 1982–1984, pp. 367–368; as cited in Meshcheryakov, *CCV*, pp. 160–161)

Indeed, Vygotsky's work, as explained in his publications, reads more like a set of pilot studies than the sort of polished research published in modern journals. Vygotsky took a different view of the practice of research than do many current researchers, arguing in *Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky, 1987) that training sessions are the most theoretically compelling periods of activity that take place during psychological research in that they represent the occasions during which learning occurs. In the training sessions, the participants learn how to use the mediational tools according to the researcher's definitions and goals; that is, the process of appropriation takes place during training. To Vygotsky, this process is of infinitely greater theoretical importance than the fully appropriated knowledge that is often studied during psychological research.

Furthermore, Vygotsky is driven to understand phenomena that are not visible, such as inner speech and how it comes into being. This endeavor is entirely inferential and only indirectly supportable through empirical evidence. To accept Vygotsky's theory of the development of inner speech—to some, the cornerstone of his broader argument that learning to think is a function of internalizing speech-based concepts through cultural practice—one needs to accept the plausibility of his or her assembly of evidence from a broad range of observable phenomena, all of which ultimately rest on the acceptance of a web of related inferences based on research that does not quite meet 21st-century

standards for reporting findings. Perhaps the absence of empirical support in Vygotsky's own work has contributed to the attempt by current scholars to conduct new investigations using many decades of accumulated knowledge, new technologies for collecting and analyzing data, and continued insights from the growing body of Vygotskian studies.

Zinchenko's chapter in *CCV* strikes me as very revealing in terms of both Russian traditions for conducting scholarship and the elusive quality of the sociocognitive processes that Vygotsky sought to describe. Both Zinchenko and Vygotsky freely draw on literature—for my purposes here, specifically poetry—to illuminate aspects of a cultural theory of the development of consciousness. Poets, psychologists, and philosophers have been equally perplexed and metaphoric about the nature of thinking and speech. Although there is some attempt to make a stronger case for the role of arts and poetics for interpretive purposes in 21st-century research (see, e.g., Cahnmann, 2003), it remains out of the mainstream; and I suspect that in the world of educational psychology, it is far out of the mainstream. I gather from my reading of Vygotsky and Zinchenko, and also from U.S.-based researchers such as Cole (1996) who work in this tradition, that Russian scholarship has been historically, and remains, more ecumenical in its search for viable sources than is allowed in most U.S. scholarship. In Zinchenko's chapter, he includes references to Russian poet and novelist Boris Pasternak, U.S. and British poet T.S. Eliot, Russian poet Nikolai Zabolotsky, Russian poet and playwright Aleksandr Pushkin, and others from the world of arts to attempt to capture the more ephemeral qualities of how people think. After quoting Pasternak at length, Zinchenko notes that

> No matter how far we move toward unraveling this mystery, we need to realize that there is an element of magic in the creative act. According to Pasternak, this act is "the tangible sorcery or alchemy, which makes the work of art seem to be an accidentally broken off piece of the very density of being or form making essence of being rather than reflection or descriptions of life" (Pasternak, 1990, pp. 366–367).
>
> It is a different question whether we can see this sorcery, whether we will be able to penetrate, *see* behind these purest forms the fringes of their internal forms, their sense and meaning. This is already an issue of our aesthetic culture or taste, an issue of the richness of poorness of our own inner form. (Zinchenko, *CCV*, p. 241; emphasis in original)

In relying on literary expression to make his points and openly acknowledge the mysterious and magical nature of his enterprise, Zinchenko accepts the evanescent qualities of the workings of the mind, yet forges ahead nonetheless. "[D]espite the possible, sometimes striking depth and transparency of thought, it is heterogeneous and syncretistic in its origins," he says. "All the forces of the soul participate in its birth" (*CCV*, p. 239). Now,

that is one difficult claim to support empirically. And yet if one turns to poets for plausible, if not verifiable, truths about the world, it provides some insight into the challenge of developing a comprehensive psychology of the human mind and its development in its historical, social, cultural, and physical context—a context that, as the reciprocal notion of context suggests, each human in turns helps to construct.

What I cannot avoid considering is that in an explicitly atheistic, materialist, Marxist psychology, its architects cannot escape the need for a degree of mysticism in their formulation. Even with an effort to ground their psychology in as scientific a foundation as possible, Vygotsky and his colleagues and descendents find that at some level, they must locate the "soul" of psychology. In Soviet Moscow, religion was not a possible source of the more mystic and magical elements of an explanation of how people and their minds come into being, function, and develop, and so poetry, I infer, was consulted as a way to explain such acknowledged mysteries. Anyone who knows me knows that I am not endorsing religion here. Rather, I am making the point that at its least visible levels, the human mind remains an evanescent construct that can only take shape for many through nonscientific means. I take comfort in the fact that some of the most brilliant minds of the last century have had no more success in explaining the mind empirically than I have. And at the same time, this mystic hole at the bottom of Vygotsky's theory gives me and others something to attempt to continue to fill, if not sink into.

Open to Interpretation

This review, although undoubtedly too long, is far too brief to do this book justice. What I have attempted to do is cover issues that I found particularly stimulating in my reading of the chapters. Another reader might provide a different sort of review altogether, which I see as a tribute to the richness that awaits those who undertake this reading. Perhaps significantly, my own organization of major themes in the volume is quite different from the editors' organization of the chapters into sections of the book. I see this divergence in our view of the book's schematic potential as a sign that this collection is open to multiple interpretations and readings and that the chapters are sufficiently replete with ideas that readers may reconstitute them to suit their own purposes and interests. There is much to be learned from the *CCV* and much to be constructed in relation to it. For those who are interested in using a Vygotskian perspective in their own work, this volume ought to provide much more than companionship as

they work to grapple with the implications of his career project and the investigations that comprise their own.

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