

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Lev Vygotsky is considered the grandfather of sociocultural theory. His theory of human development emphasizes how an individual's social and cultural worlds impact development. This theory can be applied throughout the lifespan and across cultures. According to his theory, a child's social world is guided by language, and children use language to understand and experience their world. Eventually, the language they hear (and other cultural tools, symbol systems, and practices) becomes internalized and helps them control their behavior. As children get older, they use language to spread cultural values and, as parents, language helps transmit cultural norms to children, a process that continues for generations. For Vygotsky, development and education is inherently social. Many adult learning programs are beginning to include activities into their curricula that pull from Vygotsky's theory and are moving away from rote memorization techniques. These programs encourage group collaboration, real-life simulations, and *scaffolded* learning opportunities. This entry will first provide a brief history of Vygotsky. Next the evolution and basic premises of sociocultural theory are presented. The entry ends with a few examples of how this theory plays out in real-life applications throughout the lifespan.

Personal History

Born into a middle-class Jewish family in Orsha, Russia in 1896, Vygotsky faced many challenges throughout his life impacting his own educational path and theoretical perspectives. As an intelligent Jewish boy, he longed for a university education, yet faced many limitations because of his religion. However, through fate and determination, he managed to graduate with two degrees, simultaneously from Moscow University and Shaniavsky People's University in 1917. After a short stint in teaching at a university, he moved to Moscow and eventually married and fathered a daughter. There he began his career and began to cultivate theories, which not

coincidentally were consistent with Marxist socialist ideas of the time. Many of Vygotsky's contemporaries, such as Piaget, viewed development as a series of stages that children become ready to move through over time, but Vygotsky introduced the notion that the social and cultural world guides development in different ways and as a result children from different cultures and language backgrounds differ from one another. Children use different tools for different cultural activities, and this helps them develop differentially depending on cultural context.

Unfortunately, Vygotsky's life was cut too short when he passed away at age 37 from tuberculosis in 1934. Vygotsky collaborated with his students, A.R. Luria and A.N. Leont'ev, who promoted his ideas and writings many years after his death. With the cold war and strained US-Russian relations, Vygotsky's ideas were not translated in to English until the late 1960s and 1970s.

Vygotsky's sociocultural theory embraces social experiences as guiding development. Learning, in the form of social interactions and activities, leads biological development forward. Major tenets of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory are (1) cognitive processes are socially constructed, and (2) language and culture play important roles in the link between social phenomena and psychological functioning. Vygotsky believed that higher-order cognitive abilities begin in the social world and then integrate into an individual's psychological arena.

Language Use

The mechanism through which this process happens is primarily found in language. Language, according to Vygotsky's theory, is used as a cultural tool to transmit ideas, thoughts, and beliefs from the sociocultural world to the self. Specifically, the language used with children socially is internalized through private speech (self-talk). Private speech leads to reorganization of the mind in early childhood. As a result, language helps regulate children's behavior, thinking,

and attention. Language, for Vygotsky, is embedded in culture and helps promote an individual culture's values and customs. Vygotsky conceptualized this theory with an underlying construct called the "genetic law of cultural development." He emphasized that all cultural development occurs in two planes: first on the social plane and then on the psychological plane. The social world controls the first part of cultural development primarily through social language, and then it moves to the internal psychological level through a process of internalization.

From childhood through adulthood, individuals can be caught talking to themselves (private speech). This is not an uncommon practice, and it is often being used to help individuals accomplish difficult tasks. When an individual is confronted with a very hard task, he/she may start muttering to him/herself or may even start talking out loud. This kind of self-talk helps the individual complete tasks successfully. Private speech, as considered by Vygotsky, is the perfect manifestation of sociocultural theory. Often, children will repeat language that they heard earlier when they are trying to complete a difficult task. Imagine a father and son trying to complete a very difficult puzzle. The father instructs the child to look for the piece that has blue on a corner. The child then searches through the pile of pieces and says to himself, "blue, blue corner, blue, I found it!" This is an example of private speech that displays the sociocultural structure that Vygotsky theorized. The language that the child hears is internalized and then overtly stated in order to help the child accomplish the difficult puzzle task. Over time, this overt language becomes internalized completely and gradually it is rarely spoken out loud as it becomes inner verbal thought.

Children with Disabilities

Early on in Vygotsky's career, he was a leader in studying children with disabilities. This work led to the creation of a research laboratory in 1925, which focused on the study of

‘defectology’ or “abnormal” child development. He focused on the social and cultural environments that are set up for children with disabilities. For Vygotsky, the main issue was not the primary biologically-based diagnosis that the child presented with, but rather the secondary social repercussions of having the disability and how children were treated, socially, as a result of their disability. He felt that these social repercussions, rather than the biological ones, led to bigger or more severe problems in cultural development or socialization. Children with disabilities were largely isolated and marginalized, and this to some extent prevented the full development of more complex social processing. As such, Vygotsky was one of the earliest proponents of inclusive education where children with disabilities are educated in the same classrooms as typically developing children to maximize the chance of receiving typical social interactions with others.

Zone of Proximal Development

Sociocultural theory has been highly influential in education settings. The zone of proximal development (ZPD) is a metaphorical area that lies between what children are capable of accomplishing by themselves and what they can complete with the help of a more experienced individual (e.g. a parent, teacher, coach, or more knowledgeable peer). This ZPD is where learning happens best and where children are able to push their own development forward. Dynamic assessments were developed in contrast to standardized cognitive testing, and modeled after the ZPD idea, to measure a relative change in cognitive performance with the help and instruction of a more experienced guide (i.e. a therapist, teacher, or counselor). By using dynamic testing, the more experienced guide can keep the child within their ZPD and obtain a true measure of what the child is capable of. Adults also have a ZPD when they encounter a new task that may be more difficult than they are used to (e.g. perhaps a new computer program, or

driving to a place they have never gone to before). Alone, adults may experience frustration while attempting the task and they may not even be able to complete it, but with the assistance of another, adults can successfully navigate that new computer program or arrive at the new destination.

Scaffolding

One of the most notable ideas that neo-Vygotskyians have spread is scaffolding. Much like scaffolds provide support during building construction, scaffolding is when a more-skilled adult (or peer) aids a less-skilled other toward completing a difficult task. Though Vygotsky never actually used the term scaffolding, much of his research alludes to this concept. Neo-Vygotsky theorists have applied this concept throughout the lifespan. Elderly individuals with Alzheimer's disease and/or dementia, who suffer memory loss and cognitive deficits, benefit from good scaffolding that aids in solving difficult tasks or in maintaining their current skill level.

Applications

Sociocultural theory can be seen in a variety of real-world applications. Parents might hire a tutor to provide extra scaffolding for their child to succeed in a given subject area or peer-tutors will be used in classroom settings. Tutors work one-on-one with students and help children work in their ZPD so they can succeed on difficult tasks. Over time, the less-skilled other performs at a higher level independently in the classroom or on homework.

Parents around the world might also teach their children about culturally valued customs and traditions (such as a unique family recipe, or a special holiday tradition). These values are passed down through generations through social interactions and conversations in the native language. This helps sustain and maintain these culturally important conventions.

For adults, learning a second language can be more successful if they are immersed in a culture and thus forced to use their second language. This context allows adult students to learn a second language through social and cultural tools that are embedded in the culture itself.

Though his life was short, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory permeates throughout our society. Educational systems and sociocultural practices in communities have important impacts on an individual's development throughout the lifespan. Vygotsky's work highlights the way in which these systems interact to influence development.

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See also Scaffolding, Cognitive Development, Emotion Regulation, Interactions Interpersonal, Language, Socialization, Social Understanding

Future Readings

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