Definition: Vygotsky, Lev Semyonovich from The Columbia Encyclopedia

1896–1934, Russian psychologist. His most productive years were at the Institute of Psychology in Moscow (1924–34), where he expanded his ideas on cognitive development, particularly the relationship between language and thinking. His writings emphasized the roles of historical, cultural, and social factors in cognition and argued that language was the most important symbolic tool provided by society. His Thought and Language (1934) is a classic text in psycholinguistics.


Summary Article: Vygotsky, Lev
From Encyclopedia of Educational Theory and Philosophy

Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) is the most celebrated Russian psychologist, both in Russia and worldwide. His popularity today is so immense that some authors refer to a “Vygotsky boom” or, somewhat skeptically, a “Vygotsky cult.” Yet, at the same time, Vygotsky is the most controversial, mysterious, and self-contradictory of Russian psychologists. Thousands of laudatory scholarly papers uniformly glorifying Vygotsky as the founder of virtually any idea in psychology and education are almost outbalanced by a fairly consistent critique of the multitude of conflicting and contradictory “versions of Vygotsky” featured in this literature, Western and Russian alike. Most often, this critical Vygotskian literature identifies Western interpretations of Vygotsky as the key to the problem of “understanding Vygotsky” (see also van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) and calls for getting back to the “original texts”—that is, Vygotsky’s texts translated into English (Miller, 2011). This, however, hardly solves the problem, for the translations appear highly problematic, selective, and even in certain instances largely distorted (van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011). Furthermore, even the Russian texts of Vygotsky that were posthumously published in the Soviet Union appear heavily edited, censored for politically incorrect statements, and, even in a few cases, faked (for the discussion of a case of the so-called benign forgery and associated problems, see Yasnitsky, 2012). Under these circumstances, the most reliable “version of Vygotsky” seems to be the one that is developed in the recent studies and publications of the group of “revisionist” scholars, whose research is solidly grounded in archival, historical, and textual materials (see Yasnitsky, 2010, 2012). This revisionist narrative necessarily takes into account the life story of Vygotsky and his Russian and international associates against the background of the sociocultural history of the interwar period and addresses (a) the axiomatic base and foundational principles of Vygotsky’s thinking, (b) the activities of his first “instrumental period” of the 1920s, and (c) the dramatic “holistic revolution” in Vygotsky’s thought and his struggle for the integrated theory of human consciousness and sociobiological and cultural-historical development in the 1930s. This entry presents an overview of that revisionist narrative and the consequent importation of Vygotsky’s ideas into the West—albeit sometimes in mutated form— and briefly assesses Vygotsky’s continuing influence in the domains of psychology and education theory.

Axiomatic Base and Foundational Principles

Vygotskian scholarship is often criticized for ascribing to Vygotsky certain “pioneering ideas” that, in
fact, do not belong to him and, in a few instances, were widely shared by many of his contemporaries. It can be said that the whole set of Vygotsky’s beliefs, attitudes, and values that together constitute the axiomatic base of his theory belong to this socially shared set of revolutionary ideas of the Russian intellectual milieu of the early 20th century. Most of these are pretty much at odds with our ideas about the world, at least from the dominant contemporary “Western” perspective.

First, as a child of his time, Vygotsky spent all his youth in the cultural environment of the provincial town of Gomel within the borders of the Jewish Pale of Settlement at the western outskirts of the Russian Empire. Being raised in a prosperous, secular Jewish family, Vygotsky received extensive training in a wide range of subjects, but he was leaning toward literature, arts, theater, and the history and culture of the Jewish people. His earlier writings of the period of his studies at Moscow University (1913–1917) reflect his interest in the topic of literary criticism; romanticism in the German tradition of Wilhelm Humboldt and his followers; mysticism; a preoccupation with the “Jewish question”; and a fairly critical attitude toward socialism and related ideas of the transformation of society. In Russia, a major, truly dramatic transformation of the entire system of values took place soon after the Socialist Revolution of 1917 led by the Bolshevik faction of the Russian Socialist Democratic Labour Party (later renamed the Communist Party). However, the “romantic” historicism and preoccupation with literature, art, language, and culture remained among the set of Vygotsky’s foundational ideas until the last days of his life.

Second, it is virtually impossible to adequately understand Vygotsky outside the utopian cultural context of Russia that surfaced in the widely shared belief in the possibility of radical transformation of the entire social framework that Vygotsky wholeheartedly espoused soon after the Revolution of 1917. This Soviet idea, although not particularly original, resonated with a wide range of modernist movements of the early 20th century, for instance, with the American progressive movement. However, what distinguished the Soviet brand of this progressivism was the firm conviction that human nature—similar to social life—could become the object of Promethean experimental interventions and that creation of a new, more advanced human type (a higher stage of human evolution, a “new man,” or a genius-like “superman”) was one of the goals of the postrevolutionary era. In his various writings of the mid-1920s, Vygotsky clearly proclaimed his commitment to the messianic mission of creating a new, revolutionary psychological theory of the human psyche and consciousness and, at the same time, of finding concrete scientific methods of normative production of such “new men” of the Communist future.

Third, another important constitutive element of Vygotsky’s axiomatic base was his involvement with the official philosophical basis of most of scientific research in humanities and social sciences in the Soviet Union—the philosophy of Marxism. Vygotsky’s Marxism had little to do with economic theory or its contemporary political interpretations. Furthermore, in some of his writings, he clearly expresses his distaste for direct application of Marxist ideas to psychological theory. Instead, on a higher level of generalization, Vygotsky borrows from Marxism certain principles that appeared to have promise for dealing with the problems he saw in the human sciences. One of these ideas is the imperative to analyze any phenomenon as a dynamic, historically developing process, rather than as being static. Another important idea is the leading role of interpersonal exchange, dialogue, culture, and society in human development.

All these general principles and beliefs, which Vygotsky shared with many of his contemporaries, inspired his work in diverse and quite often contradictory ways.

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Although he wrote copiously on the topics of human development and education, Vygotsky virtually never carried out studies in educational settings. Instead, the main sphere of application of his talents during the most productive last decade of his life (1924–1934) was the field of special education, or "defectology," as it was referred to in the Soviet Union. By analogy with handicapped people using special aids to compensate for their physical disabilities, and building on his youthful fascination with Romanticism's emphasis on cultural processes, Vygotsky created a blend of the two and proposed the idea of "cultural mediation"—that is, the use of special "psychological tools" that are instrumental in human development by helping individuals gain control over their own psychological processes. The utopian, Promethean dimension of Vygotsky's thinking is particularly clear in his proposal to build a "theory of cultural development of higher psychological functions" on the basis of research on the use by individuals of special instruments to master their own behavior in order to reach higher, more advanced stages of cultural development. In a series of experimental studies that Vygotsky conducted with his associates in the 1920s, he showed how children who used special auxiliary "stimuli," or "signs" learned to master their "psychological functions" in the experimental settings used to study problem solving, could eventually develop "higher" functions such as logical memory or voluntary attention. The idea of external "psychological tools" in facilitating development, according to Vygotsky in the 1920s, was supposed to demonstrate the role of culture as the instrument of "mediated," cultural development.

The second most important general idea of Vygotsky's "instrumental period"—the social origin of the human mind—was supported by observation of children's performance in these situations of problem solving, which led Vygotsky to extensively quote the French scholar Pierre Janet (1859–1947), who in his general law of cultural development stated that every psychological process in its development passes from the external, interpersonal to the internal, intrapersonal stage, or, in other words, gets "internalized."

The ideas of this period were expressed in several scholarly articles that Vygotsky published in the 1920s. Also, he attempted to formulate a general "instrumental" theory of cultural development, but he never finished any of the several larger works he was engaged with at that time. These draft manuscripts, however, were uncritically published after Vygotsky's death under titles that never occur in Vygotsky's records (e.g., *The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions*), with considerable editorial omissions and interventions, and were subsequently commonly believed to present the core of Vygotsky's theory.

**Toward "Holistic" Theory**

It appears that at the end of the 1920s or the beginning of the 1930s, Vygotsky experienced a major personal and professional crisis caused by his utter dissatisfaction with the state of his theory, and a combination of personal, sociopolitical, and theoretical factors. On a number of occasions in his papers, oral presentations, manuscripts, private notes, and personal correspondence with his associates, Vygotsky expressed his criticism of their theory of cultural development for its utter abstractness and unclear practical applicability and for its radical separation between the higher and the lower psychological functions; the emphasis on the signs and the ignorance of the world of meanings; the gap between intellectual, volitional, and emotional phenomena; and the neglect of the structural and systemic nature of virtually all psychological processes. The whole system of theoretical concepts was undergoing major reconstruction and reformulation in his mind. This radical shift can be best understood...
as the dramatic transition from the “instrumentalism” of his earlier period to the “holism” of the last two
to three years of his life (1932–1934).

Vygotsky developed his “holistic” views in accordance with his Romantic and Marxist awareness of the
priority of personality, culture, and consciousness, and under the influence of German scholars of the
Gestalt school, with several of whom he and his associates personally met, corresponded, and
collaborated. Holism postulates the priority and the dominance of the whole over the constitutive
elements, atoms, components, and parts; as a result, holism regards the human being as a whole,
integrated organism, rather than as being a composite mechanism readily analyzable into parts. It was
during the holistic period that Vygotsky abandoned his earlier mechanist speculations about stimuli,
reflexes, “psychological instruments,” and reactions and forcefully argued against research on elements
and in favor of “analysis by units” that preserve all characteristics of the whole. In the writings of this
period, Vygotsky speculated about a number of such “units of analysis” that would take into account
social, personal, intellectual, emotional, and biological characteristics of a human being within his or her
psychological environment. Perhaps the most famous notion of Vygotsky’s, the “zone of proximal
development” that designates the difference between the level a child could achieve when acting
without assistance and the level attained via assisted performance, was introduced in Vygotsky’s
writings of the last two years of his life, but—like many other innovative ideas of the period—remained
only briefly sketched, not operationalized, and underdeveloped theoretically.

The history of the importing of Vygotsky’s ideas into the West is well documented (Valsiner, 1988) and
is marked by a number of publications of the 1930s, 1960s, and 1970s that were initiated mostly by
left-leaning intellectuals sympathetic to the Soviet Union or the prosocialist case and who were
struggling to bring the issues of culture, mind, meaning, and consciousness back into the human
sciences (see Bruner, 1990). But real popularity in North America did not come to Vygotsky until the
1980s when his ideas where widely disseminated, primarily among educationists, and presented, quite
mistakenly, in sharp contrast to the ideas of Jean Piaget, who had remained a cult figure throughout the
1960s and 1970s.

However, despite the actual “Vygotsky boom” in North America, the imported version of Vygotsky’s
theory in the West failed to preserve the whole complexity of Vygotsky’s theory and is largely
fragmented, if not misguided. This is why the celebrated notion of the “zone of proximal development”
was disseminated as an idea that a child learns from the external input from a “knowledgeable other”
that, on the one hand, is fairly distant from the vague and imprecise meaning of this expression in
various Vygotsky’s writings of 1933–1934 and, on the other hand, in fact, is quite in agreement with the
mainstream behaviorist thinking about learning and development with its emphasis on external
“reinforcement.” Therefore, it is the rapidly developing theory and practice of dynamic assessment
(see, e.g., Haywood & Lidz, 2007) that remains perhaps the most notable, concrete, and important
educational application of Vygotsky-inspired ideas in Western educational system. On the other hand,
the integrative and holistic potential of the developmental science advocated by “the Mozart” and “the
Beethoven of psychology”— Vygotsky, and his closest and most important associate Alexander Luria
(Toulmin, 1978)—has been largely ignored to date, and it is yet again put on trial in the renewed
proposal of the “romantic science” (Sacks, in press) of the integrative cultural-historical and bio-social
psychology (Yasnitsky, van der Veer, & Ferrari, in press).

See also Activity Theory; Bruner, Jerome; Marx, Karl; Piaget, Jean; Progressive Education and Its
Critics; Social Cognitive Theory

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Further Readings


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