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After Vygotsky

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ABSTRACT*: During the last two decades, there has been a growing and unprecedent interest in Vygotsky's ideas. Surely, Vygotsky himself never envisioned the impact that his ideas were to have in the years to come.Precisely, in this essay we examine his main idea about how mind is constructed and embodied in semiotic resourcesby the child. Differences between social and cultural dimensions are also discussed. Particularly, it is emphasized that human meaningful activities are cultural mediated.*
KEYWORDS:*Vygotsky;Signs mediation;Mind; Culture.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

During the last two decades, there has been a growing and unprecedent interest in Vygotsky's ideas. Surely, Vygotsky himself never envisioned the impact that his ideas were to have in the years to come. In spite of his premature death in 1934, Vygotsky is one of the foremost figures, along with Piaget and Bruner, in the reconfiguration of the study of thought and language during the second half of the twentieth century. Drawing on his own background in philosophy and literary studies, Vygotsky analyzed and transformed the psychological concept of thought in such a way as to make evident its inherent relation with culture (Stetson, 2009). In this paper, precisely, we explore the relationships among meaning, culture and creative thought.

In pursuing this goal, we don't rely on neurological or informational models, instead, we explore the possible integration of Vygotsky's sociocultural approach, Bruner's cultural psychology, and Geertz's symbolic anthropology into a preliminary framework that considers creative thought as both constituted by and realized in the use of cultural tools of symbols. That is, mental functions are thoroughly dependent upon cultural resources that are not adjuncts to but constituents of mental activity.

The authors aforementioned are examined in terms of a relational perspective where symbols are not in the "exterior" (culture) or in the "interior" (mind) but have a relational nature. The meaning of symbols has an ambidextrous quality: meaning exists both "inside" and "outside" of individuals, both in our minds and in culture.

From a relational perspective, culture and mind are not considered as two separate sorts of existence-one external to the other-but are constructed relationally as if they were two dimensions of the same social reality.

Our argument is presented in two main parts. In the first part, we describe the conceptual basis for a symbolic approach to mind and culture. Instead of considering computer models–widely used by cognitive psychologists–mind is defined, as Vygotsky and Peirce did, as sign operations that are the product of specific cultural conditions. In the second part, we examine Vygotsky, Bruner, and Geertz, among others, in terms of a cultural–semiotic perspective where meaning is the main subject matter. It is argue that cultural meaning is essential because it guides and controls our individual actions. The fact that brain, mind and culture coevolved, mutually dependent the one upon the other for their very realization, has made unsustainable the conception of creative thinking as something intrinsically determined or as a set of self–organized processes.

II. MIND AS A SYMBOLIC SYSTEM

For many decades, mind was approached as an enclosed system that possessed intrinsic or inherent cognitive mechanisms. The task of psychologists, then, should be to 'discover' those cognitive processes that make thought possible. The main idea with this cognitive solipsistic orientation is that mind can be conceived as a self-contained system. Human thought is seen as a closed entity with a predetermined psychoneurological organization. If thought possess a built-in organization, culture, then, is just an accessory factor that influences this or those mental processes without affecting its invariant nature. Since the thirties, however, Vygotsky defended the idea that all mental processes are culturally mediated:

Every [mental] function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on individual level; first, between people (*interpsychological*), and then inside the child (*intrapsychological*). This applied equally to voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of

concepts. All the higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 37).

Even Piaget, who has been accused of adopting an individualist approach to consciousness, he clearly stated that: "There are no more such things as societies qua beings that there are isolated individuals. There are only relations… and the combinations formed by them, always incomplete, cannot be taken as permanent substances." (Piaget, 1932, p. 360). Even though both Piaget and Vygotsky recognized the important role that sociocultural milieus play on mind development, their approaches made a different emphasis on semiotic functions. From a Piagetian point of view, semiotic functions were a transitional stage that emerges when pre-operational children interact with objects and begin to attribute meaning to them. Later on, symbolic behavior are subordinated to major logical-mathematical structures. In Vygotsky's view, symbols constitute the essential psychological tool of consciousness (Medina-Liberty,&Treviño-Gutierrez, 2001; Medina-Liberty,2009, 2017). Vygotsky vigorously emphasized the relationship between psychological processes and the cultural and historical forms of human activity: "the true direction of the development of thinking is not from the individual to the socialized, but from the social to the individual (1934/1962, p. 20). The transition of cultural forms or patterns of behavior to inner processes involves the reconstruction of psychological activity on the basis of *signs operations*. It is the use of cultural or symbolic tools, mainly speech, what makes possible mental functioning. Symbol use, thus, re-creates and re-organises the whole structure of behavior just as a physical tool re-creates the whole structure of labor operations. A symbol is a thing that represents something else. A drawing of a cat, the written word "cat", or cat as a spoken word comes to be understood as representing a real cat. The use of language is, of course, the prime example of sign-use but another good example is creative play, when checkers are cookies, papers are dishes, broom sticks are horses, a box is the table, and so on. By manipulating symbols we are essentially thinking in a way the infant could not in the absence of the actual objects involved. As Vygotsky said: "Thought is not merely expressed in words, it comes into existence through them" (Vygotsky, 1981, p. 125).

It is because the conventional–cultural–character of the relationship between symbol and referent that we must take into account the inevitable cultural–conventional–milieu of human actions. But what is culture? Since the concept of culture is evasive and ambiguous (see Kuper, 1999 and Eagleton, 2000, for a complete discussion), how, then, is culture conceived inside a semiotic approach? Does culture and society mean the same thing? Since "culture" and "society" are among the most litigious concepts in psychology and social sciences, we will devote the following section to this polemic issue.

III. SOCIETY AND CULTURE

Society and culture are sometimes treated as synonymous, and sometimes they are radically distinguished (Greewood, 1997). We sustain that "social" is a notion that can be appropriately applied to animals when referring to interactions among members of the same species or even to advanced social behavior as tool use in primates; we reserve "culture", however, to complex symbolic behavior such as language, communication, and thought. Since have developed more deeply the distinctions and the similarities between these two concepts elsewhere (Medina-Liberty, 2012), it will be suffice to say here that we consider that the social can be found in the sets of arrangements and general agreements that members of certain group or community sustain and keep them together. Groups, populations, cities, and even countries, are bound, precisely, by keeping these general arrangements and agreements alive. Those animal behaviors that are governed by biological determinants are excluded from this definition although more complex behaviors such as those of higher primates are encompassed by it. As for culture, we subscribe Geertz definition as a semiotic system: *The concept of culture I expose… is essentially a semiotic one. Believing with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs* (1973, p. 3).

Culture, in one word, is characterized as a shared conventional system that is represented by symbols. In this sense, mental functions as thoroughly dependent upon cultural resources–signs or symbols–that are not adjuncts to, but constituents of mental activity. In Vygotsky's words:

The inclusion of a tool in the process of behavior (a) introduces several new functions connected with the use of a given tool and with its control; (b) abolishes and make unnecessary several natural processes, whose work is accomplished by the tool; and alters the course and individual features (the intensity, duration, sequence, etc.) of all the mental processes that enter into the composition of the instrumental act, replacing some functions with others (i.e., it re-creates and reorganizes the whole structure of behavior just as a technical tool re-creates the whole structure of labor operations (1981, pp. 139–140).

In effect, children do not just make sense of, or for, gestures and words; they make sense with gestures and words, that is, they use them to make culturally recognizable meanings, to perform meaningful actions. In such view, symbolic resources are not simply accessory to or simply facilitators to mind that would otherwise exists as an independent entity or as an autonomous unit. Instead, mind is primarily constituted by them.

We are entirely in agreement with the assumption that some animals–i.e., ants, termites, nonhuman primates–inhabit a social environment but only humans lived immersed in a cultural atmosphere. Behaviors such as recognizing other members of the group, the establishing of relationships based on kinship or dominance ranks or the deployment of different communicational means such as "calls" or specific sounds when danger is detected can be considered as social; patterns of more conventional activities, however, such as teaching, verbal language, all types of artistic practices, reading and writing, driving a car or piloting a plane, to name only a few, are actions exclusively human, that is, of a cultural nature. Even when nonhuman primates use tools for accomplishing some task–i.e. chimpanzees use sticks to "fish" termites from their mounds–, they don't do it as an effect of a "culturally transmitted" tool-use practice (see Tomasello, 1999, 2019, for a in-depth discussion). Undoubtedly, a chimpanzee is a social creature: they scratch each other's head, they play together, they develop dominance ranks and they even cooperate to solve problems. All these activities illustrate a social dimension of behavior but they are not conventional enough to be considered as "cultural actions". In their natural habitats, for instance, chimpanzees do not point or gesture to outside objects for others, do not teach or transmit deliberately any knowledge or new abilities to other, do not offer objects to other members of the group by holding them out nor try to bring others to specific locations so that they can observe things there (Tomasello, 1999, 2019). All these actions, however, are easy and habitually found in humans as young as one year old (Bruner & Haste 1987; Wood, 1998) or even earlier (Butcher & Goldin-Meadow, 2000).

In sum, we circumscribe the term 'social' to those behaviors that occur when two or more organisms are involved in a joint action while 'culture' will be applied exclusively to conventional or symbolic relationships. We believe that there is an intimate relation between the special cultural–symbolic–milieu that humans inhabit and the fundamental, distinguishing, symbolic qualities of human psychological processes.

IV. THE CULTURAL EMBODIMENT OF MIND

As we previously mentioned, gestures can be said to be meaningful insofar as they provoked a meaningful response. Even pre-verbal actions are unavoidably connected in one way or another to cultural meanings or communicative interactions. These human interactions will gradually provide not only a meaningful surrounding–the natural habitat of humans–, but child's actions themselves will make sense because of this particular cultural medium.

When a child performs an action there aren't meanings going through–or attached to–in addition to the physical action: the action itself is the vehicle for some particular meaning. It is precisely this meaning, which is deeply entrenched in cultural practices, the one that makes this particular action meaningful. Almost no human activity is carried out exclusively by means of an automatic process of self-regulation–with the only obvious exception of some mechanical actions such as walking or breathing.

It is important to mention that meaning is not fixed, it is characteristically relational; that is to say, it can't be thought of as something static with predetermined boundaries. There is not a single thing or an individual action that *has* meaning, as somehow built-in. Words, pictures, gestures, body language, diagrams, sounds, maps, numbers, and a very large number of other objects or actions can only be considered as symbols because meaning was made for all of them, by someone, and according to some conventions. This is a human ability that permits us to perform culturally meaningful actions.

Interestingly, the study of meaning can brings on together psychology–via Bruner– and anthropology–via Geertz. Both Bruner and Geertz have located meaning at the core of human sciences. According to Bruner:

The central concept of a human psychology is **meaning** and the processes and transactions involved in the construction of meanings. […] To understand man you must understand how his experiences and his acts are shaped by his intentional states… The form of these intentional states is realized only through participation in the symbolic systems of the culture. (1990, p. 33).

If we remember Geertz's definition of culture as a complex web of significance and take into account the above statement by Bruner, it is promising to propose an integration of symbolic anthropology and cultural psychology. Both disciplines regard as central *the nature and cultural shaping of meaning-making, and the central place it plays in human action*. Cultural meaning is essential because it guides and controls our individual acts.

The significant matter here is that mental functions should not be considered separately from the exercise of symbolic devices (Nelson, 2007; Costall, 2007). How the mind works is greatly reliant on the tools at its disposal. Cultural resources such as symbols (i.e., words, pictures, gestures, numbers) make impossible to regard them as external or supplementary to mental functioning, they are not prosthesis. They are a powerful element in any human psychological activity (Medina–Liberty, 2000, 2017; Mahn, 2012).

If we believe that culture–the medium where all human activities and relationships takes place–is the location of meaning generation, that meaning is fundamentally conventional, and, thus, cultural; then the external or the interpsychological functioning of the individual is inherently related to the internal properties of words and speech. The "locus" or "place" of meaning; therefore, is the cultural sphere, which is not in or out of

the individuals but among them, distributed in an intersubjective manner, and cannot be simply configured as a physical space. The study of meaning provides the basis for a relational perspective since symbols meaning is not in the "exterior"-culture-or in the "interior"-mind-but has a relational nature. The meaning of symbols has an ambidextrous quality: meaning exists both "inside" as an essential component of self–regulation, and "outside" of the individuals, as an other–regulation process, both in our minds and in culture.

From a relational perspective, mind and culture are no longer considered as two separate dominions that possesses independent processes, instead, they are constructed relationally as if they were two expressions of the same reality.

V. CONCLUSION

Vygotskian perspective shows that psychological processes –i.e., perceiving, learning, remembering– cannot be sustained by themselves; they are always situated in a cultural setting and they are always dependent upon the utilization of cultural resources.

In several occasions, Vygotsky stated that his studies had only just begun and that he had merely been able to show the complexity of the system that is created by the use of symbols and the unification of thinking and speech. As it is well known, he was not able to conduct more research on it as he died shortly after collecting the articles that was organized later as *Thinking and speech*. The approach developed by Vygotsky can be used to advance a relational perspective on the association between the human mind and the cultural milieu in which the two are not ontologically separated.

In sum, all children grow up to be cultural beings. The process of human development is thus indissolubly bound to the process to the process of enculturation, of immersing and orienting oneself within semiotic systems, systems of meaning.While it is impossible in a short article to do justice to Vygotsky's analysis of semiotic functions of mind and the complexity of the thinking/speech system through which children make meaning of themselves and their worlds, I'm hoping that this brief examination into his ideas can show the relevance of reading Vygotsky's works today, perhaps even more today than in his own time.

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