

Introduction

What is this book and what is it about?

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This is a *handbook* for use in higher education. This means that this book was explicitly written with the idea of providing excellent teaching materials for a college course on cultural-historical psychology and its applications. As such it can be used both within and beyond the relatively narrow disciplinary confines of psychology. Thus, all contributors to this volume and its editors deliberately made considerable effort to present their ideas, no matter how complicated, most clearly and accessibly to the readers: students and course instructors alike.

This is an *edited handbook*. Unlike many other college handbooks written by one or a few authors, this handbook has been authored by a couple of dozen contributors, international experts and prominent scholars from North America, Western Europe, Russia, Asia, and Africa. As a result, not all chapters are even in their style and in certain instances they differ notably in length and in the demands they make on the reader. However, an effort was made to compensate for the varying difficulty of the chapters by locating them in different parts of the book: typically, the most complicated topics are covered in the last chapters of each part, whereas the relatively easier chapters can be found at the beginning of the parts.

This is a handbook on *cultural-historical psychology*. One might argue that there are all too many cultural, or historical, or social psychologies that circulate under the banners created from the combination of these hyphenated keywords. Designations such as socio-cultural, or cultural-historical, or even socio-historical psychology and their derivatives such as, for instance, cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT) are widely spread. Indeed so, and, given the multitude and diversity of different brands of either social or cultural or historical psychology a clarification is needed. This particular handbook is primarily based on the legacy of the Russian and Soviet tradition that originates in the writings of the scholars of the Vygotsky–Luria Circle (Yasnitsky, 2011a) led by “the Mozart” and “the Beethoven of psychology” (Toulmin, 1978), Lev Vygotsky (1896–1934) and Alexander Luria (1902–1977). However, it is clearly not limited to the works of these Russian researchers. In fact, this tradition is equally grounded in the research of the Russian followers of Vygotsky, his contemporaries from Western Europe and the United States, and predecessors of the tradition of German Romanticism of the early nineteenth century (Valsiner and van der Veer, 2000). The chapters of the handbook attempt to present the whole diversity of the sources of cultural-historical psychology as we understand it and even go further, beyond the confines of psychology proper. As the

last part of the handbook shows, there were and still are numerous interdisciplinary dialogues and exchanges between cultural-historical psychology and several fields of knowledge and human practice, such as psychotherapy, art theory, relatively new disciplines of cognitive and dialogic sciences, semiotics, and even the “Romantic Science” of brain studies.

“Cultural-historical psychology,” curiously enough, is a phrase that, in fact, never occurred in Vygotsky’s writings. The phrase was coined and introduced in the context of critical and, quite often, politically motivated defamatory discourse about Vygotsky’s theory and, as strange as it may seem, was subsequently assumed by Vygotsky’s followers in the Soviet Union (Keiler, 2012). Furthermore, it appears that much of Vygotsky’s legacy was distorted in the often misunderstood and mistranslated versions of his texts in English (van der Veer and Yasnitsky, 2011),¹ the works of his interpreters in North America (Miller, 2011), and even in his Russian texts, which were heavily edited, censored, and at times falsified in Soviet editions (for an overview see Yasnitsky, 2011b, 2012b, 2012c). Much work is currently being done by the investigators of the revisionist strand in Vygotskian scholarship. That research promises to reveal new insights into Vygotsky’s idiosyncrasies, such as his progressivist worldview, belief in the “superman” of the Communist future and the possibility of the “socialist alteration of man,” and quasi-religious utopianism. On the other hand, the revisionist scholarship is uncovering previously hidden processes in the history of the development of cultural-historical theory, such as the gradual intellectual convergence between Vygotsky’s group in the Soviet Union and the group of German-American scholars associated with the holistic Gestalt movement. The convergence of these two research traditions in the period before World War II – recently termed “cultural-historical Gestalt-psychology” (Yasnitsky, 2012a) – was full of promise of a major theoretical synthesis which, however, for a number of reasons, political reasons being among the key ones, never took place. The continuing work in this direction is a clear indication of the ever-changing nature of scientific research and will, possibly, lead to new heights in psychological science. Given all these factors – the unclear and seemingly unfinished nature of Vygotsky’s research, the lopsided and at times distorted image of his scholarship and scientific contribution, and the dynamics of change in the field – one might wonder if such a thing as “cultural-historical psychology” exists at all. In fact, it does exist, is represented by several decades of research and publications, and this handbook aims to demonstrate this.

Cultural-historical psychology is firmly grounded in the belief shared by a great many researchers who postulated the necessity and possibility of an integrative psychological science of cultural-historical and bio-social development. Such an approach regards the human psyche as a whole in its cognitive, emotional, and volitional manifestations, in relation to the physical and physiological and, on the other hand, social and psychological environment. One of the most remarkable

1 The reader will note that different translations of Vygotsky’s texts are used in this handbook. This is unfortunate but reflects the fact that no authoritative translations as yet exist.

statements of faith in such a holistic psychology was given by the German Gestalt psychologist Max Wertheimer, Vygotsky's older contemporary, who stated:

only we Europeans, at a late stage of culture, have hit upon the idea of separating the physical and psychic of many physical processes in this way. Think of someone dancing. In his dance there is joy and grace. How is that? Does it represent on the one hand a display of muscles and movement of the limbs, and on the other hand psychic consciousness? No. (Wertheimer, 1924/1944, p. 96)

Numerous theories have claimed their solutions to the problem of the fragmentation of man and, therefore, psychological science. Some advocate emphasizing the physiological foundation of human psychology. These are nowadays represented by the explosion of neurological studies on the brain and its functional relation to human cognition, mind, and learning. Others claim the uniqueness of each individual human existence and find refuge in exploring the depths of personality, spirit, and consciousness. Yet, both extremes are hardly a novelty in psychology, and have been continuously discussed virtually from the very beginning of this field of knowledge. The failed attempts to unite both extremes are well known under the banner of the "crisis in psychology." In this respect, Wertheimer commented on the dramatic juxtaposition between the "materialist" and the "idealist" psychologies, the "idealist" fascination with consciousness, and its neglect of matter:

People speak of idealism as opposed to materialism, thereby suggesting something beautiful by idealism and by materialism something gloomy, barren, dry, ugly. Do they really mean by consciousness something opposed to, let us say, a peacefully blossoming tree? . . . Frankly, there are psychological theories and even plenty of psychological textbooks which, although they speak continuously only of conscious elements, are more materialistic, dryer, more senseless and lifeless than a living tree which has probably no consciousness in it at all. It cannot matter of what materials the particles of the universe consist; what matters is the kind of whole, the significance of the whole, the meaning of the whole, the nature of the whole. (Wertheimer, 1924/1944, pp. 95–96)

Thus, it is this belief in the possibility of a holistic human science of mind, body, and consciousness in their inseparable unity and in cultural and historical development that has driven the scholars who cumulatively contributed to the establishment of the "cultural-historical psychology" as we know it now and as it is presented in this handbook. And it is primarily the inseparable union and the scientific legacy of the founders of this tradition, Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria, glorified by Stephen Toulmin as the "Mozart" and the "Beethoven" of psychology, which forms the solid foundation for this psychology with its promise of a middle way between the two extremes of Nature and Culture in contemporary scholarship. Thus, it seems that Stephen Toulmin's pronouncement of cultural-historical psychology's promise for the "unification of the biological and social studies" that was published several decades ago has not lost its utter contemporary relevance:

unless behavioral scientists in the West begin to develop a more general theoretical frame of their own which has something approaching the scope and integrative power that “historical materialism” has had for the Russians, our own arguments are doomed (I believe) to remaining split down the middle. On the one hand, there will be those who see all human behavior as one more phenomenon of Nature: who are concerned, that is, to discover in human behavior only “general laws,” dependent on universal, ahistorical processes and so free of all cultural variability. On the other hand, there will be those who see Culture as a distinct and entirely autonomous field of study, set over against Nature: a field within which diversity and variety are the rule, and “general laws” are not to be looked for. (Toulmin, 1978)

Structure of the book

The structure of this handbook clearly reflects the main ideas that were developed by these Russian scholars and their associates. The presentation of the materials of this book for teaching and learning purposes is fairly simple and straightforward.

The whole handbook consists of six parts with three chapters in each (with the exception of the last one that is a double-sized part containing six chapters). In most cases, the first chapters of each part present a somewhat more general overview of the problems and topics covered in the part, whereas the subsequent chapters provide a zoom-in on certain specific issues of primary importance. Parts I and II cover the closely interrelated areas: the *Theory* and the *Method* of cultural-historical psychology. These include a general introduction to Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology (Chapter 1 by Ronald Miller) and two chapters on specific theoretical problems of psychological instruments (Chapter 2 by Janette Friedrich), and consciousness as dynamic semantic system (Chapter 3 by Ekaterina Zavershneva), two issues that Vygotsky was consistently preoccupied with during the two decades of his short yet very productive scientific career. The chapters on *Method* present a general discussion of cultural-historical methodology (Chapter 4 by Aaro Toomela), followed by an analysis of “hot topics” in psychological, educational, and learning sciences, such as dynamic assessment (Chapter 5 by Alex Kozulin) and the (in)famous zone of proximal development (Chapter 6 co-authored by Jaan Valsiner and René van der Veer).

The following three parts, somewhat in contrast to the preceding theoretical parts, focus on subject fields that have been developed most within this theoretical framework. Part III, titled *Child*, provides an overview of the topics of human development and educational practices as they were actually developed under the umbrella of the “developmental education” movement, also known as “developmental learning and instruction” (Chapter 7 by Galina Zuckerman). This topic is directly picked up in the following chapter that also addresses the famous issue of the theoretical opposition of “nature versus nurture” as it is known in traditional Western educational theory and practice (Chapter 8 by Elena Grigorenko). The issues of learning and development are yet further advanced in a somewhat more theoretically oriented last chapter of the part that discusses developmental research

on children in the light of the topics of cultural mediation and transition from joint, collaborative, “symbiotic action” to independent psychological processes in the growing child (Chapter 9 by Igor Arieviditch and Anna Stetsenko).

The following part, part IV, *Language and culture*, provides an overview of the Romantic(ist) roots of cultural-historical psychology and traces its origin back to the ideas of the German philological and anthropological tradition of Wilhelm von Humboldt and his followers in Western Europe and Russia (Chapter 10 authored by Marie-Cécile Bertau). Cultural-historical psychology’s preoccupation with the topics of language, thinking, and culture is exemplified by its research on speech and, specifically, inner speech. This constitutes, in fact, one of its major contributions to psychology and psycholinguistics (Chapter 11 by Anke Werani). A somewhat different view on the Vygotsky–Luria tradition in research on culture and human psychology is presented in the last chapter of the part. This chapter discusses cross-cultural studies within this tradition, partially exemplified by the author’s ongoing research on magical thinking in contemporary adults residing in industrially developed countries of the West (Chapter 12 by Eugene Subbotsky).

The third part of the block of the three “empirical research” parts, part V, entitled *Brain*, deals with the fashionable field of brain research and opens with a clear and unambiguous statement that “there can be no cultural-historical psychology without neuropsychology.” Furthermore, the author forcefully claims that the opposite is also true: there can be no neuropsychology without cultural-historical psychology (Chapter 13 by Aaro Toomela). The following two chapters more concretely discuss the theory and practice of dealing with learning disabilities based on decades of brain research in the cultural-historical tradition (Chapter 14 co-authored by Tatiana Akhutina and Gary Shereshevsky). The final chapter of this part discusses the state of the art in the international field of cultural-historical neuropsychology as we know it today (Chapter 15, created by Bella Kotik-Friedgut in collaboration with Alfredo Ardila).

The final part of the handbook, the double-sized part VI, presents six chapters that lead us beyond the confines of psychology proper and demonstrate the multiple *dialogues between cultural-historical psychology and allied scientific disciplines* and related social practices. To these belong *psychotherapy* (Chapter 16 co-authored by the Russian researchers and practitioners Alexander Venger and Elena Morozova), the *theory of art* in the tradition of the renowned film director Sergei Eisenstein and his collaborators Vygotsky and Luria (Chapter 17 by Oksana Bulgakowa), the emergent *dialogic science* (Chapter 18 by Marie-Cécile Bertau), *cognitive science* (Chapter 19 by Maria Falikman), and *semiotics* (Chapter 20 by Vyacheslav Ivanov). This part concludes with a chapter on “Romantic Science,” written in the essayistic style characteristic of the author, which deservedly earned him worldwide popularity in academia and far beyond it (Chapter 21 by Oliver Sacks).

The format of a book suggests a linear and sequential exposition of its material. The chapters of this handbook unfold in a certain sequence, and this suggests a chronological order of their presentation. However, we are far from imposing a specific reading order on the student or, for that matter, the course instructor who

wishes to use this handbook for college teaching. Indeed, the book allows multiple entry points and can be tailored to a wide range of educational applications not necessarily confined to a course on “cultural-historical psychology,” or to the context of a department of education or psychology. In addition, quite a number of chapters reveal essential affinity and numerous interconnections with each other, and suggest multiple pathways through the book depending on the purposes of those who use it and the settings in which the book is used. We can only hope that we, as editors of this handbook, have managed to keep a reasonable balance between the multitude of topics and perspectives on cultural-historical psychology without ever losing the whole complexity of the interrelations between theory and practice, mind and body, individual and culture, structures and development, or psychology and other disciplines. And if we have failed to do so, at least we hope to have failed in an interesting and, still, highly instructive way.

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Excerpt

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PART I

Theory

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1 Introducing Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology

Ronald Miller

If 27 years of prison have done anything to us, it was to use the silence of solitude to make us understand how precious words are and how real speech is in its impact on the way people live and die.

Nelson Mandela (2011, p. 274)

At the center of Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology is the fact that human beings are distinguished by their capacity for signification, that is their ability to use signs (words) in order to make meaning. Not only do we experience sensations and produce actions in the world but we also attempt to understand and explain our actions and experiences as well as the actions of others and other things. This bundle of interconnected human attributes that include meaning, understanding, and explaining is what we commonly call consciousness (or self-consciousness) and it is this distinctive human quality that Vygotsky designated as the object of study for the discipline of psychology. There is no better place to begin an account of Vygotsky's cultural-historical psychology than with the words with which he ended his book, *Thinking and speech* (1987, p. 285), that were written a few months before his untimely death.

Consciousness is reflected in the word like the sun is reflected in a droplet of water. The word is a microcosm of consciousness, related to consciousness like a living cell is related to an organism, like an atom is related to the cosmos. The meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness.

In the last chapter of *Thinking and speech*, entitled "Thought and word," Vygotsky comments that "*thinking and speech are the key to understanding the nature of human consciousness*" (1987, p. 285; italics in the original). But he is at pains to point out that like water, whose properties are different from and cannot be derived from those of its elements (hydrogen and oxygen), consciousness must be understood as a unity of thinking and speech or, in other words, as a whole that is constituted by thinking processes and speech processes that in combination produce what he calls verbal thinking. According to Vygotsky, the unit of verbal thinking (or consciousness) is the sign or what we commonly understand as word meaning and, as he points out, word meanings, or signs, always entail a generalization (an act of thinking). For example, the word "dog" does not refer to a single particular dog (unlike the name of a specific dog) but to the concept of dogs *in general* or to what is common (general) to all dogs. It is in this sense that word meaning captures

the unity of thinking (generalization) and speech (the word “dog”) and provides an appropriate analytical unit for the study of human consciousness understood as the totality of meanings or meaningful whole of our human experience. Because of the centrality of word meaning in Vygotsky’s theory, it is important to reflect on his words.

We found the unit that reflects the unity of thinking and speech in the *meaning* of the word. As we have tried to show, word meaning is a unity of both processes that cannot be further decomposed. That is, we cannot say that word meaning is a phenomenon of either speech or thinking. The word without meaning is not a word but an empty sound. Meaning is a necessary, constituting feature of the word itself. It is the word viewed from the inside. This justifies the view that word meaning is a phenomenon of speech. In psychological terms, however, word meaning is nothing other than a generalization, that is, a concept. In essence, generalization and word meaning are synonyms. Any generalization – any formation of a concept – is unquestionably a specific and true act of thought. Thus, word meaning is also a phenomenon of thinking. (1987, p. 244; italics in the original)

The above quotation is important for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that it illustrates, in a particularly vivid fashion, Vygotsky’s distinctive style of theory building. The idea of a unity of interpenetrating processes rather than a mixture consisting of separate elements is, as we will see, a recurring theme in Vygotsky’s texts. Vygotsky uses the contrast between inside and outside to illustrate his point about a unity. Think of a container (like a cup) that has an inside (meaning) and an outside (sound) aspect but which can only exist as a “unity” (of both aspects) in which it is not possible to isolate the aspects from each other without destroying the whole. In addition, it is important to notice the linkage between word meaning and generalization as a “true act of thought.” For Vygotsky, then, speaking and thinking are two sides of the coin of consciousness.

When we meet what is called a cow and say “this is a cow,” we add the act of thinking to the act of perception, bringing the given perception under a general concept. A child who first calls things by their names is making genuine discoveries. I do not see that this is a cow, for this cannot be seen. I see something big, black, moving, lowing, etc., and understand that this is a cow. And this act is an act of classification, of assigning a singular phenomenon to the class of similar phenomena, of systematizing the experience, etc. (1997a, pp. 249–250)

If signification or meaning making is at the center of Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory then the framework of his theory lies in the distinction he draws between natural psychological functions, such as attention, memory, motor control, and perception, that are the product of biological development (biogenesis), and what he refers to as higher mental functions that arise in the course of the cultural development of the child (sociogenesis). Unlike other animals who are caught between their biologically driven needs and the exigencies of their surrounding environment, because we are conscious beings we are able to exercise considerable control over