

Pierre Janet's relevance for a Socio-Cultural approach

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There is a growing recognition of the fact that the work of one of the founders of the socio-cultural approach, Lev Vygotsky, is rooted in the work of his predecessors and contemporaries and that a proper understanding of his insights must involve a thorough study of the social and scientific context of his work (cf. Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991b; 1994). Rather than declaring that Vygotsky was "fifty years ahead of his time" we should try and understand his work as a unique assimilation and extension of the different insights and influences which happened to be present at the time. In doing so, we do not lose sight of Vygotsky as a unique phenomenon, but rather enhance our understanding of the social and scientific embeddedness of his thinking.

The French psychiatrist Pierre Janet was definitely one of the major contemporary thinkers who provided Vygotsky with various fundamental ideas to elaborate. But he was much more than that, of course, and in suggesting that he addressed several basic questions, which are of fundamental importance for a social-cultural approach, I do not for one moment wish to suggest that this does justice to Janet's many-sided and elaborate work. Nor do I wish to suggest that there is some sort of linear scientific progress from Janet to Vygotsky. Of course, we can paraphrase Newton by saying "If Vygotsky has seen father, it was by standing on the shoulders of giants", but often we can equally well say that progress was made by treading on other people's toes, by actively resisting or distorting their ideas. This applies to the complex relation between Janet's and Vygotsky's ideas as well.

The limited goal of this paper will be to discuss several themes in Janet's work from the point of view of their relevance for our peculiar, contemporary ideas about a socio-cultural psychology. I think there is nothing wrong with such an approach, indeed it seems inevitable, as long as one realizes its dangers.

Having said this, I must confess that some distortion of Janet's views is inevitable in view of the limited space we have available here. For, as you probably know, Janet's work covered a period of exactly 60 years of creative insights and as a result I can do little more than highlight several of his very early studies and then switch to some themes that were prevalent in his more mature work of the late 1920s and early 1930s. In doing so I will proceed according to the method well-known to sculptors: I will simply cut what seems superfluous from a larger body of material (cf. Valsiner and Van der Veer, in prep.). The dangers of such a procedure are well-known to the reader.

EARLY INSIGHTS

As you may know, Janet (1885, 1886a, 1886b, 1886c, 1886d) began his scientific career by treating mental patients through hypnosis. He soon hit upon the phenomenon of "dissociation" ("disdoublement"), that is, the fact that under hypnosis some part of the subject's personality may claim that it is aware of some event or feeling (say, experiencing pain), whereas another part claims the opposite. The personality is



dissociated into two distinct parts that seem to function more or less independently. The subject seems unaware of various events, but in reality they are "simply separated from the ensemble of psychic phenomena of which the synthesis forms the idea of "me" (Janet, 1887, p. 471; cf. Hilgard, 1977). Janet's analysis of this early finding was quite interesting for our purpose.

Firstly, he posited that the hypnotizer was to an extent the co-creator of the events that take place. To give an example, it was Janet who suggested to one of his patients - a certain Léonie - to give a name to one part of her personality and he soon claimed that the so-called mediums in spiritistic sessions might be persons with a dissociated mind, who ascribe their feelings to some dead person, as this is what is socially expected in that situation. The subject is, as it were, experiencing her own feelings and thoughts in socially accepted ways (cf. Janet, 1892).

Secondly, and related to the first point, Janet claimed that adult personality is an exceedingly complex construction consisting of different layers and parts. These layers and parts develop in the continual social interaction with other people. Janet was not at all inclined to attribute the resulting complex whole to the unfolding of some genetic factors or to brain maturation, as he saw no point in introducing "physiological phantasies that have less poetry without having more certitude" (Janet, 1888, p. 278).

Thirdly, Janet assumed that the particularities of these complex constructions were due to specific events in the life-course of the person and sometimes originate in early childhood events. The fact that some events are not perceived/accepted by the normal "me" and relegated to another group of phenomena, or personality, Janet (1886c, 1988) hypothesized to be due to some traumatic events in childhood. This suggestion antedates Bowlby's (1974) recent hypothesis that the origin of multiple personality lies in traumatic experiences in early childhood.

In other words, such socio-cultural features of the human mind as its social, complex, and developmental nature were, albeit implicitly and in embryonic form, present in Janet's early writings and it comes as no surprise that in the next decades he would turn to such thinkers as Baldwin and Royce, who had developed theoretical views that could strengthen and elaborate his own ideas (cf. Valsiner and Van der Veer, 1988).

MAJOR THEMES IN JANET'S LATER WORK

In the next decades Janet would enormously elaborate, change, and refine his theoretical views, but the sources of his claims would always remain the same. Elaborate analyses of the phenomena displayed by the adult mental patients he treated provided a firm foundation for most of the claims he made (as we have seen above), but in addition to that he had a thorough knowledge of his contemporary scientific literature, and, finally, did not shy away from bold, and at times bizarre, speculation (cf. Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991a).

Relying on these three sources Janet arrived at three, interrelated claims about the origin, development, and nature of human mental functioning. The first claim was that *all private mental actions have a social origin*. The nature of adult human memory was Janet's favorite example to illustrate this claim. He had observed that patients invariably adapted their account of past events to the person of the listener. Such accounts are socially shared events and the speaker attempts to fit his reminiscences into a story that will be intelligible to the listener. In doing so he or she (re-)constructs his or her memory as do the reactions and questions of the listener. The retrieval and expression of memorized events, then, is a social event that consequently modifies its content. Moreover, in Janet's opinion the storage and encoding of events are social processes as



well. We experience certain events that we immediately try to fit into existing categories and stories that will make sense to another person when related. In doing so we make these events intelligible to ourselves as well. This illustrates one of Janet's (1928, p. 22) fundamental laws, which says that "All social conducts performed vis-_-vis others have their private repercussions. All things we do vis-á-vis others, we do them vis-_-vis ourselves; we treat ourselves as another". It is interesting that in this context Janet speaks of private *repercussions*, that is, the construction of the self seems to follow the social, interpersonal interactions. In other places in his works it seems to be implied that the construction of the self and the growth of interpersonal relations proceed simultaneously and that the personal and the social self are two sides of the same coin (cf. Valsiner and Van der Veer, in prep.).

Generalizing, we might say that for the later Janet all seemingly private psychological functions, such as language and thought, are originally and essentially social. They evolved out of the need to communicate with others. This illustrates once again Janet's (1929, p. 521) fundamental claim, made well-known by Vygotsky, that all higher, typically human, mental processes have a social origin: they first exist between people as social, interpsychological actions and only afterwards become transformed into private, intrapsychological processes.

The example of human memory can also serve to illustrate Janet's second fundamental claim. It was that *all higher mental processes are the result of a long and complex development*. Janet considered both the phylogenetic and the ontogenetic domain. In this context he claimed that animal memory is totally different from adult human memory. It is inflexible, not adaptable to varying circumstances and based on association. Janet (1928, pp. 213/223; 1936, pp. 159-169) coined this type of memory "*restitutio ad integrum*", meaning that one stimulus triggers the other, associated stimuli, which leads to the restoration of the integral whole.

Janet speculated that the first human type of memory rested on the enacting of the experienced event, but that with the onset and development of language different levels of verbal encoding developed, such as simple description, narration, and, finally, what he called fabrication. What we call memory is an exceedingly complex whole of different intellectual operations, which partly exist side by side and partly become superimposed upon each other. Modern children only gradually master the whole set of these culturally-based mnemonic operations. Incidentally, it is only natural that proceeding from these assumptions Janet (1928, pp. 260-262) was quite critical of the existing memory research with its heavy emphasis on non-intelligent mnemonic operations (e.g. repetition) and its meaningless material (e.g. nonsense syllables). At the background of his critical attitude was also the more general conviction that man is a story-telling animal and that human memory is primarily based on the telling of a story ("*r_cit*") to oneself and others. As it takes time to master such habits and as men are much superior to animals it can be said that adult higher memory processes, and mental processes at large, are the result of a complex phylogenetic and ontogenetic development.

Put in this way Janet's third basic claim almost seems to follow automatically. It said that the *higher mental processes do not exist immutably in a special, spiritual domain, so to speak, but are intimately tied to the actions the subject performs*. Janet claimed that to an extent human behavior can be explained by reference to external stimulation and that human actions can be understood as reactions to environmental stimuli. This reasoning would seem to bring Janet quite close to behaviorism. But in fact, Janet was quite critical of behaviorism, which in his view neglected a most important second source of stimulation: human language and the knowledge embodied in it. It is language and culture which transform the original (bodily) actions. The most primitive form of human preverbal memory - to come back to our earlier example - Janet posited to be



based upon material objects. Janet mentioned the use of such material mnemonic devices as the knot in the handkerchief and the buying of souvenirs by tourists. He hypothesized that with the advent of language such type of material memory aids lost much of their prevalence to the verbal aids we discussed before. Nevertheless, memorization remains an active process of (re-)construction or, in short, an action and such actions often originally rely upon the use of material means and bodily movements.

CONCLUSION

These few and cursory remarks must suffice to give an impression of the potential value of Janet's ideas for a socio-cultural account of mind. All of his themes, the social, developmental, and action-based nature of higher human mental functioning seem relevant for a future socio-cultural theory and such diverse thinkers as Wallon (Nerchine-Grynberg, this volume), Leont'ev and Vygotsky assimilated different aspects of his work. In his turn, Janet himself was in great debt to the major thinkers of his time, such as Bergson, Lévy-Bruhl, Royce, and Baldwin (cf. Valsiner and Van der Veer, in prep.).

All this does not imply, of course, that Janet's theorizing was unproblematic and neither do I wish to suggest that Janet anticipated all of Vygotsky's most seminal ideas. One of Janet's ideas that most modern researchers would find unacceptable, for example, is the idea that present-day non-Western civilizations can tell us much about our own past as these civilizations did not develop any further whereas we did. For Janet and many of his contemporaries this was still a rather unproblematic claim and he consequently freely called non-Western people the "living documents" of the Western past when he speculated about the historical origin of cultural practices. The idea that Janet anticipated all of Vygotsky's ideas is likewise untenable. Vygotsky and other co-constructors of a socio-cultural view made ample use of Janet's notions and speculations, but put them to their own use, combining them with ideas of other researchers and synthesizing all ideas into a new integral whole. The matter of scientific influence is a complex one (cf. Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1988) and here I will just remark that while a comparison of Vygotsky's and Janet's views does justice to neither of them - as both held views that cannot be dealt with in the limited context of such a comparison - it is very instructive to see how Janet coming from a very different background made very valuable contributions to a socio-cultural theory of mind. It is by combining the contributions of different major thinkers and critically reviewing them that a future socio-cultural theory should be constructed.

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LA RELEVANCIA DE PIERRE JANET PARA UNA APROXIMACION SOCIO-CULTURAL. *Resumen en castellano*

El psiquiatra francés Pierre Janet fue uno de los pensadores que más contribuyó a inspirar el pensamiento de Lev Vygotsky y la teoría socio-cultural de la psique. Sus ideas de que a) todas las acciones mentales privadas tienen un origen social, b) todas las funciones mentales superiores son el resultado de un desarrollo prolongado e intrincado, y c) que las funciones mentales superiores resultan de acciones concretas son muy importantes para una aproximación socio-cultural. En este artículo se demuestra que ya en los textos psicoterapéuticos clásicos de Janet se puede hallar el germen de estas ideas. Basándose sobre su trabajo terapéutico, su conocimiento de la literatura científica de su tiempo, y en especulaciones arriesgadas Janet formulaba principios que son importantes para las variantes contemporáneas de una teoría socio-cultural de la psique. Se argumenta que tal teoría se puede construir en parte usando versiones extendidas y enmendadas de las ideas fructíferas de Janet, Baldwin, Royce, Vygotsky y otros gigantes de la disciplina.