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# **Vygotsky's Legacy: Understanding and Beyond. An introduction**

## **Summary**

*After a short introduction explaining the organizational and historical background of this special issue, we present a brief outline of the content of Van der Veer and Valsiner's book on Vygotsky. Next we will introduce briefly the topics the four commentators are dealing with in their contribution. Finally, we briefly indicate the authors' rejoinder.*

## **Vygotskij's nalatenschap: begrijpen en gebruiken. Een inleiding**

*Na een korte introductie waarin de organisatorische en historische achtergrond van dit themagedeelte geëxpliciteerd wordt, geven we een beknopte schets van de inhoud van het boek van Van der Veer en Valsiner over Vygotskij. Vervolgens geven we kort aan welke de thematieken zijn die in de bijdragen van de auteurs worden aangesneden, en de reactie hierop van de auteurs van het boek.*

## **The background**

In december 1991 an important book has been published for those theoreticians, historians and empirical researchers interested in and committed to Vygotsky and Vygotskian related topics, René van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner's stout volume *Understanding Vygotsky. A quest for synthesis*.

Already one month later, on January 30, 1992, a symposium was held around this book at the Leiden University organized by the Leiden Center for Child and Family Studies in cooperation with the Dutch Society of Educational Psychologists, Section Philosophy and History of Education. Four papers were presented on that day dealing with specific aspects of Vygotsky's broad field of interest that are also covered by the book. Wim Wardekker dealt with Vygots-

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ky's view of schooling, Ed Elbers discussed his ideas about play, Paul van Geert scrutinized Vygotsky's theory of development, and Sacha Bem finally tried to use Vygotsky's ideas in taking his stand in modern debates on cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind. At the end René van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner reacted on the four contributors under the provisional title 'Vygotsky's legacy'. The presence of the second author of the book at the conference, Jaan Valsiner from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, was made possible by a PIONEER-grant of the Netherlands' Organization of Scientific Research to Van IJzendoorn.

After extensive revisions, all contributions are included in this special issue of *Comenius*.

It is no accident that the first author of this most comprehensive and voluminous contribution to the study of the life and work of Lev Vygotsky, René van der Veer, domiciles in the Netherlands. The attention paid to the importance of Vygotsky's ideas and work started in Holland already in the early seventies, when the late C.F. van Parreren together with J.A.M. Carpay wrote *Sovjetpsychologen aan het woord* (The words of Soviet psychologists; 1972). They then dealt with Vygotsky's thinking from a rather broad perspective, and also paid attention to the constructive elaboration of his ideas by researchers like Gal'perin, El'konin, Davydov and Zaporozec (cf. Van Parreren 1985). Their own specific focus was on educational psychology. They tried to formulate an action psychological view on learning with stress laid not only on the results of learning, but especially on the process of learning. They pointed to the largely social determination of action, to the fact that the quality of pupils' acting can be influenced via the process of education, and to the possibility to influence pupils' cognitive development by means of an adequate curriculum sequence (Van Oers 1985; Van der Veer 1988).

In the context of the breakthrough of the Vygotskian cultural-historical theory in the Netherlands a few years after the book of Van Parreren and Carpay, another important book related to Vygotskian thinking was published, the doctoral dissertation *Onderwijswetenschap en marxisme* (Educational science and marxism; 1976) written by J. Vos. What interested him most were the anthropological and methodological aspects of Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. Anthropologically speaking Vygotsky adheres to an anti-naturalistic view on mankind. Dealing with methodological aspects, it is his thesis that only pedagogical and psychological research methods ought to be used that are object adequate, that is in agreement with the basic assumption of man as a meaningful acting and historical being (Van Oers 1985, p. 69).

After this first push the interest in Vygotsky and the cultural-historical theory in general has grown exponentially, especially in educational psychology, developmental psychology, early childhood education and the educational sciences in the Netherlands. Vygotsky has interestingly enough also been compared with the famous Dutch 'first generation' philosopher of education and

empirical educational researcher Ph.A. Kohnstamm (1875-1951), who was heavily inspired by the school of Külpe and Selz. Both Kohnstamm and Vygotsky share the fundamental belief that education is absolutely necessary for the cognitive development of the child (cf. Wolters 1976). In the light of this growing interest in Vygotsky, it is, however, surprising that up till the present day only one of Vygotsky's articles has been translated into Dutch. It is the one on play Ed Elbers is referring to in his contribution (see Vygotsky 1982).

It is not going too far at the moment to speak of 'a second generation' of experts in this area in the Netherlands (Van der Veer 1988, p. 191). However, the connection between the first and second generation of experts is quite strong. Van der Veer has published the only monograph in Dutch on Vygotsky, his doctoral dissertation *Cultuur en cognitie. De theorie van Vygotskij* (Culture and cognition. The theory of Vygotsky) in 1985 with Van Parreren as one of his supervisors. Wim Wardekker (this issue) and Bert van Oers worked together with and were inspired by J. Vos and presently cooperate with J. Carpay at the Free University of Amsterdam.

Now we have explained the background of this special issue along organizational and historical lines, we turn to Van der Veer and Valsiner's book.

### Understanding Vygotsky

The authors commence their book with a short chapter describing Vygotsky's life and work. They emphasize his Jewish background and provide us with new insights into the personality of Vygotsky using his personal correspondence. This chapter is followed by a chapter covering Vygotsky's little known work on literary criticism and the psychology of art. Together these two chapters form a concise description and analysis of Vygotsky's thinking before he moved to Moscow and entered into the academic circles of the time. It is not generally known that Vygotsky's first interests lay primarily in the area of education and especially the education of handicapped children. Van der Veer and Valsiner provide a detailed overview of this work showing how Vygotsky's early ideas were deeply rooted in the psychology, defectology, and educational theory of the time.

The next chapter on psychoanalysis is something of a detour. The authors discuss the development, flowering, and demise of psychoanalytic theorizing in the Soviet Union of the beginning of the century. In so doing they provide the reader with a deep insight into the fundamental role psychoanalytic theory played for Luria and – to a much lesser extent – Vygotsky. Vygotsky's entrance into psychology was made possible by Kornilov, his superior at the Institute of Experimental Psychology in Moscow and an elaborate discussion of Kornilov's thinking enables the reader to grasp the way Kornilov facilitated Vygotsky's entrance into academia. A thorough acquaintance with the theories of his Soviet

contemporaries as well as psychological thinking at large enabled Vygotsky to write his oftentimes discussed but little known essay on the crisis in psychology. Again the authors demonstrate that Vygotsky's profound analysis of the bifurcation in psychological theorizing was based upon a thorough knowledge of contemporary – continental – psychological, educational, and philosophical thinking.

No doubt 'Gestalt' theory played the most fundamental part in Vygotsky's attempts to develop his own system of thinking. Gestalt thinkers such as Koffka, Köhler, and Wertheimer, were the major theoretical thinkers of the time and Gestalt theory was a theory that lay claim at explaining all major problems of the science. Small wonder then that Vygotsky tried to find his own position by analyzing, criticizing, and opposing Gestalt ideas. Van der Veer's and Valsiner's chapter on Gestalt theory provides us with a unique insight into Vygotsky's personal contacts with major Gestalt theorists and shows once again the imbeddedness of his thinking. While Vygotsky was much influenced by the theories so far mentioned it is quite clear that towards the late nineteenth century he developed his own blend of theoretical ideas, the so-called cultural-historical theory.

In the longest chapter of the book the authors discuss the major ideas of this theory paying attention to both its strong points and its weak spots. They show how this theory naturally led to the cross-cultural research Luria undertook in Central Asia, an investigation that brought Vygotsky and his group into conflict with the Soviet ideological gate-keepers and authorities. It was in this period that leading ideologists launched an attack at Vygotsky and his co-workers, which led them to transfer their research centers to Leningrad and Kharkov.

The final chapter of the book gives us some insight into the ideological climate of the time and the ostracizing techniques the authorities used. In fact, the authors reveal that Vygotsky's name was smeared until several years after his death. Before his death, however, Vygotsky hoped to avoid major conflicts by moving his research to Leningrad and Kharkov and several of the final chapters of *Understanding Vygotsky* discuss Vygotsky's major role in pedology, the field he moved to at this time. Again, the authors have unearthed a wealth of unknown material to show Vygotsky's embeddedness and unique features against the background of contemporary thinking within this field. Finally, Van der Veer and Valsiner devote attention to Vygotsky's seminal analysis of Descartes' legacy within psychology and his excursions into psycholinguistic thinking. They show that his analysis of Descartes is highly interesting, but basically remains an unfinished work, while his psycholinguistic ideas are no less interesting but can lay little claim to originality. Especially the latter fact must come as a shock to many scholars interested in Vygotsky as his psycholinguistic ideas belong to the most well-known and cherished ones.

Summarizing, we might say that Van der Veer and Valsiner have made a major step towards a discussion of Vygotsky's oeuvre as a synthetic whole. The

subtitle of their book, 'A quest for synthesis' is no less a description of Vygotsky's seminal project and his innermost intentions as an apt description of their own efforts. No doubt the book will need to be amended and extended in the future but as it stands it is the most comprehensive and thought provoking book on Vygotsky and his co-workers now available.

### Comments and reply

In his contribution *Elbers* points to an ambivalence between the themes of the transmission of culture to children and children's spontaneous construction of knowledge in Vygotsky's work.

In his opinion most Vygotskian-inspired research has neglected the children's own contribution to their development focusing nearly exclusive on the cultural transmission task of adults. *Elbers* attempts to harmonize the two lines in Vygotsky's thinking by using his views on play, a topic only briefly dealt with by Van der Veer and Valsiner in the context of imitation. There need not be, according to *Elbers*, an antithesis between the two strands if we study how children spontaneously and jointly with adults contribute to the reproduction and change of culture.

Two topics are addressed in *Van Geert's* stimulating paper. He first gives a formal clarification of the notion of 'zone of proximal development' by problematizing the aspect of social assistency or help. In contrast with the sacrosanct position the helper is normally attributed in Vygotskian literature, he states that sub-optimal and super-optimal help both can lead to a lesser than competence level.

His second issue deals with linkages between time scales in development. Based on Vygotsky's view on the interaction of sociogenetic and ontogenetic time scales, he quite convincingly argues for the study of the dynamic links between ontogenetic, microgenetic, sociogenetic and phylogenetic time frames.

*Wardekker* elaborates in his contribution on the thesis that from a Vygotskian perspective the idea of authorship, that is the creative use of existing cultural potential, is an important aim of education. He contrasts this with Vygotskian interpretations in which almost exclusive emphasis is put on the cultural transmission of knowledge.

The explanation *Wardekker* offers for this unwanted interpretation of Vygotsky's view on education – knowledge and cultural meanings as given cultural products, as tools instead of cultural perspectives – is the absence in Vygotsky's work of a theory of the role of individual authorship in the socio-cultural production of knowledge.

*Bem* does not offer an exegesis of Vygotsky's writings, but he uses some of Vygotsky's concepts to determine his own position in modern discussions on cognitive psychology and philosophy of mind. In line with Vygotsky (and De-

wey) he argues against the separation of behaviour and cognition, and turns himself against behaviorism and cognitivism. Using the concepts of 'conscious behaviour', 'development' and 'culture' he tries to sketch an integrative program in which action and thought are internally related to each other. Along this lines, according to Bem, any social and physicalistic reductionism can be avoided.

In their response *Van der Veer and Valsiner* show the intellectual pleasure they have in what they coin as 'the authoritative discourse on developmental and educational voices' (this issue, p. 423). From their insight that Vygotsky's work is basically unfinished, and in order to come to a fundamental appreciation of his significance for the social sciences, they welcome the comments made by the four authors. They deal with it in a charitable (Bem and Van Geert) or more critically constructive (Elbers and Wardekker) way.

The current debate should be considered as a contribution to the ongoing spiral of understanding and application of Vygotsky's ideas in our present cultural-historical situation. Instead of sterile exchanges between monadic and defensive 'schools of thought' we may here enjoy the intellectual challenges of theory-in-progress.

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