

SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE THEORIES OF G.H. MEAD
AND L.S. VYGOTSKIJ: AN EXPLANATION?

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Summary

Several researchers have noted the striking similarities between the philosophy of G.H. Mead (1863-1931) and the cultural-historical theory developed by the Russian psychologist L.S. Vygotskij (1896-1934). In this paper we present some of the similarities and suggest that they have their origin in the writings of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel.

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The writings of both Herbert Mead and Lev Semenovic Vygotskij play an important role in contemporary child psychology. Some researchers (Kaye & Charney, 1980; Mundy-Castle, 1980) appealed to Mead's theory in order to explain the phenomena observed in adult-child interaction. Other researchers (Wertsch, 1979, 1980; Wood, 1980) tried to find a theoretical perspective in the work of Vygotskij. Still other psychologists have tried to integrate both theories. Lock (1980) in his book on language development based his approach explicitly on both Vygotskij and Mead. He and others (Lückmann, 1977; Wertsch & Stone, in press) have noted the striking similarities between the ideas of the American social-behaviorist and the Russian founder of the cultural-historical school. Unfortunately, until now on one has been able to offer a satisfying explanation for this curious coincidence. We thus had to rely on theories such as Merton's (1961) of multiple discoveries, or on the ever present and highly ethereal *Zeitgeist*. There seems to be, however, a more matter-of-fact explanation possible. Both Mead and Vygotsij made a thorough study of the philosophy of Georg W.F. Hegel (1770-1831) and the common conceptions of their work can most probably be tracked down to Hegel's writings. In order to show this a short description of some of the common ideas in Mead's and

Vygotskij's work will be presented. After that, the origin of these similarities will be shown to be their common knowledge of Hegel's philosophy.

Mead

Most researchers in the field of adult-child interaction have been impressed by Mead's account of the origin of mind. Mead defended the position that the human mind develops in the social interaction with other people. Empiricist or rationalistic theories cannot give a sufficient account of cognitive and emotional child development. In *Mind, Self and Society* Mead formulated his conception as follows:

For if, as Wundt does, you presuppose the existence of mind at the start ... then the origin of minds and the interaction among minds become mysteries. But if, on the other hand, you regard the social process of experience as prior (in a rudimentary form) to the existence of mind and explain the origin of minds in terms of the interaction among individuals within that process, then not only the origin of minds, but also the interaction among minds... cease to seem mysterious or miraculous. Mind arises through communication by a conversation of gestures in a social process or context of experience - not communication through mind (Mead, 1934: 50).

In the same book Mead opposes to the 'prisoner in a cell'-approach, in which the child is seen as a prisoner in a cell, who knows that others are in a like position and wants to get in contact with them (Mead, 1934: 6). This approach was unacceptable to Mead because it presupposed an original, presocial mind. To account for the origin of mind in ontogenesis Mead proposed his theory of the 'vocal gestures'. Children are continually making gestures thereby stimulating the surrounding adults. Adults interpret these gestures as gestures and react accordingly. At a certain point in his or her development the child realizes that his or her gestures have indeed significance. As soon as that happens they have a meaning for the child him/herself. In Mead's words, "the individual who is stimulating others to respond is at the same time arousing in himself the tendencies to the same reactions" (Mead, 1980: 187).

Reasoning in this way Mead comes to the conclusion that the self has appeared only in the social conduct of humans. It is just because the individual finds himself taking the attitudes of the others who are involved in his conduct that he or she mentally develops (Mead, 1980: 184; 1982: 145).

Although Mead did not develop a very clear developmental theory his ideas aroused recently much interest. One of the attractive points of his theory is that it is an interactional theory, which does not reduce child development to either the processes of organic growth or to the changing factors in the environment. Another reason for Mead's popularity is that he was one of the first to highlight the 'counterfactual' character of child development. As several researchers have suggested, child development is partly based on 'adulthoodorphism'. Adults interpret the behavior of their children as if they were intentional. Kaye and Charney (1980) note that, "across a good many studies of face-to-face play in the early months ... the rule seems to be that if an infant gives his mother any behavior which can be interpreted as if he has taken a turn in a conversation, it will be; if he does not, she will pretend he has" (p. 227). Other researchers (Trevvarthen, 1980; Wood, 1980; Marková, 1982) have studied this phenomenon and suggested that it plays an important role in ontogenesis. Through the constant feedback in adult-child interaction the child will eventually realize that his actions indeed have meaning. This is supposed to be one of the most important factors in the development of intentional behavior and consciousness (Marková, 1982: 153). We can thus clearly see why Mead's theory is considered to be a source of inspiration in recent adult-child interaction research.

Vygotskij

Other psychologists have turned to the writings of Vygotskij to find a fruitful theoretical perspective. Most often one refers to his notion of social interaction (*obšenie*). Vygotskij stated that all higher psychological processes develop in social interaction. More specifically, he stated that:

Any function in the child's cultural development appears twice, or on two planes. First it appears on the social plane, and then on the psychological plane. First it appears between people as an interpsychological category, and then within the child as an intrapsychological category. This is equally true with regard to voluntary attention, logical memory, the formation of concepts and the development of volition (in Wertsch, 1981: 163).

As did Mead, Vygotskij opposed to a 'prisoner in a cell approach'. In fact, this was one of his main criticisms of the early Piaget. The child is not by nature a biological individual later to be socialized under pressure from his or her environment, but far sooner social by nature, developing through interactions with adults (Van IJzendoorn & Van der Veer, 1984: 27).

To account for the origin of the higher psychological processes Vygotskij combined his notion of social interaction with the idea of mediation. The idea was that psychological processes in child development are transformed by making use of psychological tools or signs. The most important system of signs is, of course, speech. As soon as the child is able to communicate by signs his or her psychological processes get a completely different (higher) character. These notions have been clarified by Wertsch (1979, 1980), Van IJzendoorn and Van der Veer (1984) and we will not go into any details now. What is important for this paper is that Vygotskij made a suggestion for an explanation of preverbal adult-child interaction as well. Before the child gets to the mastery of the sign system (speech) a role is played by the indexical gesture. In 1931 he formulated this idea like this:

Let us consider as an example the history of the development of the indexical gesture, which as we will see, played an extremely important role in the development of the child's speech and in general forms to a considerable extent the primordial basis of all higher forms of behavior. Initially the indexical gesture is no more than an unsuccessful attempt to grab at something. The gesture is oriented to the object and the intended action. The child tries to catch the object, which is too far away. His arms, stretched out to the object, are hanging in the air, his fingers make indexical movements. This is the starting situation for further development. Here

for the first time develops the indexical movement, which we conditionally may call an indexical gesture in itself. Here we have a movement of the child, which is objectively directed at the object, and no more than that. When the mother comes to the aid of the child and interprets his movement as a gesture the situation changes essentially. The indexical gesture now becomes a gesture for others. In response to the unsuccessful attempt to catch the object, there follows no reaction by the object, but by another human. In that way the initial meaning is brought by others into the unsuccessful movement. And only afterwards, on the basis of the fact that the child connects the unsuccessful attempt with the whole objective situation, he or she starts to react to this movement as to an indexical gesture ... The child is in this way the last to realize the significance of his or her gesture ... In this way, one could say, we become ourselves through others ... The meaning ... first exists for others and only afterwards begins to exist for the child him/herself" (in Vygotskij, 1983: 144-145).

It is clear that this conception of Vygotskij has great similarities with Mead's theory. We recognize the role of the gesture and the 'as if' (counterfactual) character of child development. On top of that both authors have underlined the originally social character of the child and rejected the 'prisoner in a cell' view. There are more similarities between the writings of Mead and Vygotskij, but for the purpose of this paper this will do. We now have to explain these striking facts.

Hegel

We know that both Mead and Vygotskij studied Hegel's philosophy. Vygotskij was much impressed by Hegel's work (see Levitin, 1982) and frequently quoted his books. He was also influenced indirectly by Hegel's philosophy, through the writings of Marx and Engels (see Van IJzendoorn & Van der Veer, 1984: 35-39). One of the reasons Vygotskij turned to philosophers such as Hegel and Spinoza, was his being not satisfied with the Cartesian paradigm in psychology. Vygotskij, and Soviet psychology in general, rejected a rigid distinction between mind and body. In dialectical materialism mind is considered to be a higher form or quality of matter (see McLeish, 1975; Van der Veer, 1984).

The mind-body problem was, in fact, one of the reasons why Mead turned to the philosophy of Hegel. Miller, in his introduction

to Mead's *The individual and the social self*, states that Mead rebelled against the theological claim that the mind (or the soul) is a supernatural substance, that it can exist apart from the body, "... his revolt against the belief in a spiritual self as a substance distinct from matter was a revolt against Cartesian dualism" (Miller, 1982: 4). Very prominent in Mead's theory is also the pragmatist idea that mind cannot be separated from action. There can be no self apart from social action and mind, belief, and knowledge are all related to conduct. Miller sees also as one of the merits of Mead's theory that it showed how the manipulation of objects by the hand is functionally related to reason or to reflective intelligence (Miller, 1982: 5). But this is, of course, one of the central tenets of historical materialism. In his account of phylogenesis Engels gave a central role to the manipulation of objects by the hand. The human mind arises out of this manipulation of objects by the hand. To put it simply: humans cannot learn or develop by just contemplating the surrounding world. The actions upon the world and the consequent feedback play a central role in the development of the human brain (see Engels, 1955). This is also the view Vygotskij endorsed in his cultural-historical theory (see Van IJzendoorn & Van der Veer, 1984).

So where are we now? We have shown several striking similarities between the ideas of Mead and some of Vygotskij's ideas. We know that Vygotskij's ideas originate in the dialectical tradition, starting with Hegel. We also know that both Mead and Vygotskij studied Hegel's philosophy. Can we track down some of the common ideas to Hegel's writings?¹⁾ Solomon (1983), in his fascinating study of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, provides some insights, which are of interest for our present purpose. Let us start with Mead's and Vygotskij's concept of 'social interaction'. Solomon makes it clear that this concept is a central one in Hegel's philosophy. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* the view is defended that without interpersonal interaction there would be no 'self' and no 'self-consciousness' (Solomon, 1983: 430). Solomon goes on to

explain the concept of social interaction by saying that, "we cannot be self-conscious unless we are recognized. This argument has been worked out in this century .. by George Herbert Mead and some latter-day pragmatists in America" (Solomon, 1983: 438). Solomon thus sees a clear connection between Hegel's philosophy and Mead's ideas. Hegel also (as did Mead and Vygotskij) rejected the 'prisoner in a cell' view. To him the individual self was in no sense immediately given, but a socially created concept. One cannot have self-consciousness without the 'mediation' of other people, or as Solomon puts it, "the self is no autonomous monad, which knows itself immediately and the world only 'mediately'" (Solomon, 1983: 436). It is thus in Hegel's opinion absurd to believe that there is an individual self prior to the interaction with other people. The self is formed through the interaction with other people. It is this (logical) thesis that Mead and Vygotskij transposed to the domain of child development.

The emphasis on the interaction with other people is in Hegel's philosophy connected with the view of active individuals. For Hegel subjects are constantly active, striving for knowledge, success etc. Solomon (1983: 385-401) devotes a whole selection of his book to, what he calls, Hegel's 'pragmatic turn'. For Hegel, to know was also to be engaged in an activity. "This thesis ... is at the heart of Hegel, and it is the main point of ... much of the 'Phenomenology' ... the traditional epistemological picture of detached consciousness trying to reach out or infer to a world 'outside' is not only philosophically inadequate because it leads to scepticism; it is a practical absurdity. Knowing is a part of living and doing ..." (Solomon, 1983: 317). This emphasis on the active subject is, of course, very prominent in the work of Mead and Vygotskij too, and it is a necessary emphasis if one supposes that the individual self(-consciousness) arises in a more or less symmetrical reciprocal interaction.

At this point the reader might be tempted to make the following objection. It is not possible to trace some of Mead's ideas to American pragmatism, thereby invalidating the thesis that

these ideas originated in Hegel's work? Our answer would be yes and no. Yes: Mead was heavily influenced by pragmatist thinkers such as James and Dewey. No: this does not invalidate our argument because these pragmatists were (at least initially) influenced by Hegel themselves. Solomon (1983: 176, 317, 391) has shown the similarities between Hegel's philosophy and pragmatism, and mentions that Dewey referred his work to Hegel²). There thus seems to be both a direct line of influence from Hegel to Mead and an indirect line. Much the same goes for Vygotskij (see Van IJzendoorn & Van der Veer, 1984: 35). We can present our findings in the following diagram.

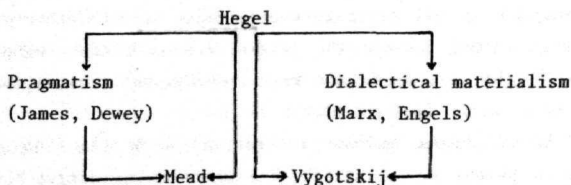


Diagram. Lines of influence from Hegel to Mead and Vygotskij.

One caveat is in order here. We do not wish to suggest that either Mead or Vygotskij accepted Hegel's philosophy as a whole. This would clearly be absurd. Both were inspired by this work, but rejected the general idealistic framework.

Conclusions

We have shown how some of the central concepts of modern developmental psychology have their origin in Hegel's philosophy. The concept of 'social interaction', the rejection of the 'prisoner in a cell' view, and the emphasis on the active subject, can all be found in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Both George Herbert Mead and Lev Semenovič Vygotskij were influenced by the ideas of the German philosopher. In this way we have explained at least part of the similarities between Mead's and Vygotskij's theories.

Researchers, such as Lock (1980), who refer to both theoretists are, without realizing it, inspired by ideas that have the same origin.

Notes

- 1) A direct attempt to show that Mead took some ideas from Hegel has been made by Marková (1982).
- 2) For further information regarding the relation between Hegelianism and pragmatism see Ph.P. Wiener (ed.), *Dictionary of the history of ideas. Vol. III*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons (1973 p. 556).

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