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Voices at play. Understanding Van der Veer and Valsiner

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Comeniuscongres

In het laatste decennium van deze eeuw is Nederland een multiculturele samenleving geworden. Wat betekent dat voor de pedagogiek? Is het praktisch pedagogisch werken veel moeilijker geworden door die multiculturaliteit? Of brengen de verschillende culturen juist meer kleur in de maatschappij? Hoe kunnen we de problematiek die het werken met verschillende culturen met zich meebrengt conceptualiseren? Of kunnen we de culturele verschillen wellicht juist positief benutten?

Ter gelegenheid van het tienjarig bestaan van *Comenius* wil de redactie van dit wetenschappelijk forum voor opvoeding, onderwijs en cultuur aandacht besteden aan die multiculturaliteit.

Dat gebeurt in de vorm van een congres, dat gehouden zal worden op vrijdag 2 april 1993 en dat als titel meekrijgt:

Pedagogisch werken over de grenzen van culturen

Op het congres vindt een confrontatie plaats tussen twee vormen van reflectie op de problemen die worden opgeroepen door de pluraliteit in cultuur en samenleving. Aan de ene kant staan de mensen uit de praktijk: prof. dr. Lotty van den Berg, Joan Ferrier en Joke van der Zwaard en tegenover zich vinden zij de filosoof dr. Henk Procee.

Procee is onlangs gepromoveerd op de studie *Over de grenzen van culturen* (Boom 1991). Hij wijst hierin het universalistisch zowel als het relativistisch standpunt af en verdedigt een pluralistische visie op culturen, waarin 'interactieve verscheidenheid' centraal staat. Dit komt neer op een poging om op een positieve wijze gebruik te maken van culturele verschillen, in plaats van ze als probleem te zien.

Het is echter mogelijk dat de alledaagse praktijk weerbarstiger is. Zo vraagt Joke van der Zwaard, die onderzoek doet naar jeugdgezondheidszorg onder wijkverpleegkundigen, zich af, wat we eigenlijk met verschillende culturen bedoelen.

Lotty van den Berg-Eldering, deskundige op het terrein van de problemen van multiculturaliteit, en betrokken bij de OPSTAP-projecten, en Joan Ferrier, coördinator van jeugdopvanghuizen in Amsterdam, zullen vanuit hun dagelijkse praktijk hun visie op het onderwerp laten horen.

Aan Henk Procee wordt gevraagd om de door die drie spreeksters gesignaleerde problemen binnen een theoretisch kader te plaatsen.

De bijeenkomst zal besloten worden met een forumdiscussie, zodat ook de bezoekers van het congres de gelegenheid krijgen om hun mening te laten horen.

complicated whole of human functions in the world. In order to understand mental phenomena we have to pay attention to our physiological make-up which is a necessary condition, as well as to the contents of these phenomena, that is, the way we as natural and social beings give meanings to the world. This constitutes a sophisticated middle course which contains much sensitivity to the unities of thought and action, of mind and body, and to the notion of development in a natural and social environment.

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René van der Veer and Jaan Valsiner

Voices at play: Understanding Van der Veer and Valsiner

Summary

The contributors all address issues that are central to Vygotsky's thinking and that need to be further elaborated. Modern (cognitive) theory is often not explicitly developmental and has, for example, no adequate conception of the sociogenetic roots of intentionality. Furthermore, developmental models are seldom made explicit or formalized and no adequate conception of the relation between different time scales in development is at hand. We still lack a satisfying conception of the relation between cultural transmission and spontaneous knowledge construction. In the opinion of the authors a central developmental mechanism is imitation 'sensu' Baldwin, which allows the child to transcend the boundaries of his own culture and, perhaps, to become an 'auctor intellectualis'.

Samenvatting

Alle bijdragen stellen kwesties aan de orde die centraal staan in Vygotskij's denken en die verdere uitwerking behoeven. De eigentijdse (cognitieve) theorie is vaak niet uitgesproken ontwikkelingsgericht en heeft bijvoorbeeld geen adequate opvatting van de sociogenetische wortels van intentionaliteit. Bovendien worden ontwikkelingsmodellen zelden geëxpliciteerd of geformaliseerd en is er geen adequate conceptie van de verschillende tijdschalen in ontwikkeling voorhanden. We missen nog steeds een bevredigende conceptie van de relatie tussen culturele transmissie en spontane kennisvorming. Naar de mening van de auteurs is imitatie 'sensu' Baldwin een centraal ontwikkelingsmechanisme dat het kind in staat stelt de grenzen van zijn eigen cultuur te overschrijden en, wellicht, tot 'auctor intellectualis' te worden.

It is of remarkable intellectual pleasure for us to join in the authoritative discourse on developmental and educational voices, the polyphony of which was triggered by our joint effort to understand the social themes which were playing

Sleutelwoorden: ontwikkelingspsychologie; leertheorie; Sovjetunie.

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in the mind of Lev Vygotsky. Indeed, this polyphony is clearly inspired by the polyphonic nature of Vygotsky's work itself and the contributors to this issue of *Comenius* either pick up a theme from Vygotsky's work to which they feel particularly attracted, or try to argue that the different themes did not always harmonize according to the laws of counterpoint. All of them, however, treat Vygotsky's work as basically unfinished and attempt to finish the score, so to speak, to rewrite a theme so that it harmonizes better with some other theme, or to make more explicit a theme that Vygotsky expressed 'sotto voce'.

In doing so they naturally interpret, extend, and change Vygotsky's original ideas and thereby illustrate one of the fundamental themes of our study: any scientific text (or voice) forms part of a universe of other texts and cannot be really understood without an understanding of these other texts. The only way to come to a fundamental appreciation of Vygotsky's significance for the social sciences is to trace these different texts and voices in his work and to reconstruct the way he synthesized them into a single, albeit unfinished whole. But in this process one must highlight some voices more than others, ignore some texts and select others, in short, one must create one's own synthesis and thereby join in the never-ending process of authoring new texts (cf. Clark & Holquist 1984).

Bem's reading of our treatise on Vygotsky leads him to an illuminating criticism of our modern fashion of 'cognitive science'. Indeed, fashions come and go, but most of the fundamental problems remain without satisfactory solutions. So we may soon (in 1996) celebrate the centennial of the classic dispute between John Dewey and James Mark Baldwin on the conceptualization of the reflex arc, but our disputes on that theme (often claiming to follow Vygotsky or Bakhtin, or even Leontiev) seem to stay within the information given by the history of psychology. Bem actually comes to the central limiting condition that renders modern cognitivism unproductive, when he claims that 'what happens within us carries no meaning in itself, but acquires meaning at the moment of perceiving, uttering, acting, in a situation...' (p. 417, emphasis added). It is here that the inevitable dependency of all experiencing (as a process) upon the irreversibility of time becomes clear. Modern cognitivism – whatever specific kind it might be – attempts at a static reconstruction of a hyperdynamic process. Hence cognitivism cannot capture the essence of psychological reality without moving on to take an explicitly developmental perspective – a move that Vygotsky consistently argued for in the course of all his dialogues with his contemporary voices in psychology.

Furthermore, as Bem points out, the modern fashion for connectionism in cognitive science remains blind to the qualitative leap (in the making of agency in development) from the 'biological urge staying alive' (p. 420) to self-organization of intentionality. Again, Vygotsky's concern with the relation of the issue of 'free will' with that of the sociogenetic roots of intentionality plays along the same tune. Just mere adaptive learning from the world is not sufficient for the development of mental functions. Instead, a qualitative leap – in the form of

dialectical synthesis – must take place to bring the developing person to the state of relative autonomy from the adaptation pressures of any time. The construction of higher psychological functions in development entails an ever-increasing difference of our reflections about the world from that world itself. The subjective psychological world in its personal uniqueness is a *new* basis for encountering uncertain situations in the future. Thus, only if the connectionist models were to include moments of dialectical synthesis – which would entail not mere ‘adjustment of weights of their connections’ but *new principles by which the connections are made* (i.e., new ‘game rules’ so to say) – modern cognitivism might claim the novelty and scientific rigor that is currently communicated mostly by persuasion. Bem’s constructive criticism of cognitivism constitutes a pleasant extension of the framework of ideas that occupied Vygotsky in his lifetime and which have been puzzling us during our effort to make sense of Vygotsky.

A similar theme – modelling non-linear developmental progression – is taken up and developed further in Van Geert’s contribution. He tackles the notion of ‘Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in the form in which it is overwhelmingly accepted in our contemporary (‘neo-Vygotskian’) world – as the ‘distance’ between the levels of independent and socially assisted problem-solving. As we have pointed out elsewhere (Valsiner & Van der Veer 1992), this currently popular reading of the ZPD concept constitutes a *pars pro toto* displacement of the original focus, which was due to the historical canalization of the appropriation of Vygotsky’s ideas in North America. Nevertheless, this currently widespread notion of ZPD is worth careful study and in great need of formal clarification. Van Geert accomplishes exactly the latter – the contrast of different loci in the level of help (see his Figure 5) leads to an interesting scenario which most of the ‘neo-Vygotskian’ almost totally ignore. Namely, as Van Geert points out, ‘sub-optimal’ and ‘super-optimal’ help can lead to a similar result: lesser than possible competence level. In a more general sense, the ‘neo-Vygotskian’ discourse in our contemporary literature seems to follow some (self-promotional) line of *educational benevolence attributed to the ‘helper’* (the teacher, the expert, etc.). The ‘helper’ is habitually viewed as forever ready to extend the mental horizons of the ‘helped’, and the possibility of intentional suppression of some domains of competence (either by ‘sub-optimal’, ‘super-optimal’ input, or avoidance of the input, or even purposeful misinformation) is not usually considered (however, see Wardekker’s mentioning of pupils’ ‘perspective of non-perspectivity’, p. 409). Surely that ‘blind area’ of the ZPD-talk is reflective of the benevolent educational aspirations of the talkers, but in our ideological preference for that side of the ‘help’ we should not overlook all the instances in our social worlds where ‘help’ is given to captivate the target, rather than enable him or her to gain more autonomy (and power). It would be very interesting to see Van Geert’s non-linear dynamic modelling efforts include *moments of strategic shifts* in the goals of the ‘helper’, along the lines of va-

rying the level of help, and its nature, in the real time unfolding of the educational process. For example, a teacher who at time 1 works within the 'optimal help' level to explain the new material, notices the innovation that young Pietje Bell (who idles in his seat) has just come up with, and instead of supporting that innovation in a helpful mode, does everything to suppress further advancement of that in her talk with the class at time 2. In general, the educational process (whether formal or informal) includes a coordination of helpful and non-helpful efforts by the 'helper'.

It is exactly here that the original emphasis that Vygotsky gave to the ZPD – the intra-individual contrast between 'already developed' and 'not yet developed' psychological functions – helps us to get out of the clouds of implied pedagogical benevolence. The child can create his own ZPD in play (and later, in adolescence, in intra-mental fantasy), whether there is another person immediately available or not, and whether that available 'helper' is actually helpful, or not. This allows for *redundant control* over the process of development – and for buffering of the 'help' of a non-helpful kind. The developing child is not just a benefactor of the help from others, but an active co-constructor of his own development.

The second moment of fundamental relevance introduced by Van Geert is the issue of linkages between time scales in development. This issue has been usually ignored by developmental psychologists, who claim to study *ontogenetic* processes while actually having evidence about some *microgenetic* phenomena. By adding to it the *sociogenetic* and *phylogenetic* time frames, and calling for the study of dynamic links between them, Van Geert is charting out new territory. Particularly intriguing is his recognition of the 'narrowness' of the linking mechanisms (see also his Figure 10). Elaboration of the exact organization of the narrow mechanisms, at least between the microgenetic, ontogenetic, and sociogenetic time scales, is a task that stems from Vygotsky's developmental emphasis, but has not been developed further.

It is at this junction that probably borrowing from traditional genetics (that was based on the unidirectional 'gene transmission' notion) may lead his explication astray. James Mark Baldwin's idea of 'organic selection' may provide a more interesting alley for further construction (see the chapter on Baldwin, in Valsiner & Van der Veer, forthcoming). It is possible that each of the levels is involved in excessive overproduction of the 'carriers' of their messages between levels, of which only few prove to be necessary and sufficient in their mission. Certainly that is documented for the connection of phylogenetic and ontogenetic levels, but a similar possibility is real for other linkages. For example, the microgenetic and ontogenetic levels may be linked by highly constrained transfer of the inventions that the child comes up with in play, to the realm of the retained new skills at the ontogenetic level. To guarantee development, children in play have to overproduce an endless set of different versions of similar actions, extend the functions of objects beyond adult uses in

pretend play, and move quickly from one activity to another. Hence the production of variability in children's conduct at any moment – it is not superfluous 'waste', but carries the function of necessity to guarantee that some of the generated variability is retained ontogenetically, in some generalized form. In a similar matter, the selectivity of the retrieval from the ontogenetic level for the given moment of microgenesis can be viewed as always partial.

Such an understanding may provide a key to the solution of a problem that Elbers raises. He observes that there is a fundamental ambivalence in Vygotsky's work between the themes of cultural transmission and spontaneous knowledge construction. Indeed, both Marxism and psychology have always had difficulty with the 'principle of spontaneity', that is, a principle to account for generativeness and creativity beyond (historical) determinism (cf. Bruner 1986, p. 78). We are sympathetic with his account of mother-child dyads co-operating in joint problem solving, although there is probably no need, as he says, to do away with the term 'other-regulation'. Although the child definitely is an active partner in joint problem solving, it is the tutor who is responsible for keeping the segments of the task to a size and complexity that the child can manage, who demonstrates that the task is possible, who controls the focus of attention etc. In short, such task co-operation shows two active partners who both contribute to the task definition and solution, but in an asymmetrical way. Although the partners solve the problem jointly, it is the adult tutor who regulates the problem solving process as a whole. In doing so, he or she can be said to provide the 'vicarious consciousness' for the child to which Wardekker (p. 407) alludes as well.

In play things are somewhat different, of course, and Elbers' attempt to reconcile the two strands in Vygotsky's thinking through a theory of play is quite interesting. In fact, Elbers' interpretation of Vygotsky's thinking is more interesting than Vygotsky's original views, who really didn't have any elaborate theory of play at all. The few ideas he had, were borrowed from such researchers as Groos, K. Bühler, and Koffka, whose general theoretical views he vehemently rejected. However, in contradistinction to Elbers, the present authors believe that a concept of imitation is central to a theory of play and, indeed, to a theory of child development at large. Elbers argues that play allows children to transcend the boundaries of the *hic et nunc*, to spontaneously and uninhibitedly explore the world, in short he attempts to formulate his own version of the spontaneity principle. However, one may accept his argumentation as true and still claim that imitation is the central mechanism of sociogenesis by defining the concept of imitation in a proper way. In *Understanding Vygotsky and elsewhere* (Valsiner & Van der Veer, forthcoming) we argue that imitation necessarily implies creativity if only because a simple copying process is bound to fail frequently and thus leads to 'mutations' of any kind. We have also argued that it is Baldwin's largely neglected theory of persistent imitation that may provide the necessary tools for viewing imitation as a constructive process, which

elucidates individual uniqueness as being constructed under the flow of social suggestions.

Wardekker's criticism of our view of imitation (p. 410) also misses the point we wished to make. The conflict between authority and authorship that he observes seems to be another variant of the alleged contradiction between determinism and spontaneity and likewise fails to see that development may be guided by the principle of 'bounded indeterminacy' as one of us has put it elsewhere (Valsiner 1987; chapter 8). In *Understanding Vygotsky* we argued that Vygotsky's notion of imitation was insufficient and that more sophisticated notions were available at his time in the form of elaborate analyses by Guillaume and Baldwin. Such a 'new' understanding of imitation is not narrowly focused on adult-child interactions, but emphasizes that children actively reconstruct the tools, scripts, and concepts their culture provides, and thereby innovate this culture.

In positing the restructuring influence of scientific concepts upon everyday concepts Vygotsky was trying to solve a problem that had concerned many scholars of the nineteenth century. The question was whether mastering some specific domains of knowledge or skills would generalize to other domains and, thus, have a facilitating influence. Unlike Herbart (cf. Geissler 1979, p. 241) he believed that such transfer was possible and the research that Shiff carried out under his guidance was meant to corroborate this claim (see Chapter 12 of *Understanding Vygotsky*). His key concern was to conceive of the mind as a developing structural, systemic whole, where the transformations of some parts (e.g. the mastering of scientific concepts) would inevitably have its repercussions for other parts (e.g. everyday thinking). In this view there can be neither isolated modules of mind (as some modern thinkers have it), nor static, non-dynamic structures, and he developed his views in a continual dialogue with the seminal Gestalt theories of Wertheimer, Köhler, and above all Koffka. It is in his lengthy review (Vygotsky 1934) of the latter's *Die Grundlagen der psychischen Entwicklung* (Koffka 1921) that Vygotsky's concern for the developing systemic structure of mental functioning becomes abundantly clear. Seen from this perspective it does not really matter whether the notion of scientific concepts is obsolete or authoritarian. From a modern perspective a Vygotskian researcher would probably like to investigate the possible transfer of more dynamic tools, such as argumentational skills, informal logics etc. Such dynamic tools allow the subject to come to a deeper understanding of reality without being committed to a particular view and as such they probably satisfy Wardekker's demand for a non-authorial education for authorship. It remains to be seen, of course, whether such transfer is actually possible and neither do we wish to suggest that Vygotsky's systemic approach solved a basic problem of developmental thinking. Furthermore, the exact analysis of the posited and widely discussed processes of 'dialogue' or 'argumentation', or 'voices in the mind' – all extensions of ideas linked with Vygotsky's emphases – needs to be undertaken. Otherwise

our productive efforts to make sense of intra-mental psychology via an analysis of its persistent reconstruction of the social inputs in internalization may end up being reduced to a chorus of barely audible voices in the mind. Maybe the notion of 'authorship' in the sense of a constructive agency that synthesizes novel voices (on the basis of socially accessible ones) is a way out of the theoretical impasse that threatens the use of polyphony metaphors in educational contexts. As Clark and Holquist (1984, pp. 80-81) have hinted, the fundamental challenge to any notion of authorship, including Bakhtin's, is the question concerning the seat of control. After all, if we conceive of the human mind as a fabric of voices or texts, a polyphony so to speak, we inevitably face the problem who is in charge, who is the choirmaster, so to speak. Both Bakhtinian and other thinkers have to solve this self/other distinction and must clarify how the self is constructed from the multitude of voices. This is a fundamental problem which we plan to discuss in detail elsewhere (Valsiner & Van der Veer, forthcoming).

So far, we may agree with Wardekker that our response to the commentaries here is indeed *intertextual*. It is particularly productive that the commentaries pick up a number of the ideas we had discovered in Vygotsky's dialogues with his contemporaries. Maybe this exercise calls for a new, more elaborate, analysis of authorship. Surely our voices interact, and novelty (of scientific value) can emerge from among endless versions of ideas constructed in dialogues. Yet the authors remain willful persons who construct their goals in these dialogues, and modify those as the experience proceeds.

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