

L.S. Vygotsky: *Mind in Society, The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*

Notes from various works in Russian between 1925 and 1935. Vygotsky's work entered the American academic scene in translation beginning in 1966 through the later 70's. The title above was edited by Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner, and Ellen Souberman (Cambridge, MA, Harvard Univ. Press, 1978). An early look at the origins of European experimental theory in contrast to American protocols.

p. 11f. Vygotsky's concept of the experiment differed from that of American psychology, and understanding this difference is important for an appreciation of Vygotsky's contribution to contemporary cognitive psychology

As every student of an introductory experimental course knows, the purpose of an experiment as conventionally presented is to determine the conditions controlling behavior. Methodology follows from the objective: the experimental hypothesis predicts aspects of the stimulus materials or task that will determine particular aspects of the response; the experimenter seeks maximum control over materials, task and response in order to test the prediction. Quantification of responses provides the basis for comparison across experiments and for drawing inferences about cause-and-effect relationships. The experiment, in short, is designed to produce a certain performance under conditions that maximize its interpretability.

For Vygotsky, the object of experimentation is quite different. The principles of his basic approach.....flow from his theory of the nature of higher psychological processes and the task of scientific investigation in psychology. If higher psychological processes arise and undergo changes in the course of learning and development, psychology will only fully understand them by determining their origin and mapping their history.

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To serve as an effective means of studying “the course of development of process,” the experiment must provide maximum opportunity for the subject to engage in a variety of activities that can be observed, not just rigidly controlled. One technique Vygotsky effectively used for this purpose was to introduce obstacles or difficulties into the task that disrupted routine methods of problem solving. [Anticipates Berstein (1975) and the differential learning of Schöllhorn, (2002)!]

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A third technique was to set a task before the child that exceeded his knowledge and abilities, in order to discover the rudimentary beginnings of new skills.....

With all these procedures the critical data furnished by the experiment is not performance level as such but the methods by which the performance is achieved.

p. 14. [What Vygotsky meant by “mediated” stimulus-response behavior, since he was not a behaviorist stimulus-response learning theorist] was that in higher forms of human behavior, the individual actively modifies the stimulus situation as a part of the process of responding to it.

One result: the results will be qualitative as well as quantitative.....

Another consequence if this new approach to experimentation is to break down some of the barriers that are traditionally erected between “laboratory” and “field.” Experimental interventions and observation may often be as well or better executed in play, school and clinical settings than in the psychologist's laboratory.

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p.64f. To study something historically means to study it in the process of change....To encompass in research the process of a given thing's development in all its phases and changes....fundamentally means to discover its nature, its essence, “for it is only in movement that a body shows what it is.” [affirms the critical role of context, as did Gestaltists (whose origins and move to the US are close to Vygotsky's), and, later, systems-dynamice movement theory]