

What is the “Social” in “Social Development?”

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While I chose to title my talk today “What is the ‘social’ in ‘social development?’” it could just as easily have been “What is ‘development’ in ‘social development?’” For the term ‘social development’ is, I believe, expressive of some fundamental philosophical biases that permeate psychology in general and developmental psychology in particular. Specifically, I will explore two assumptions concerning the subject matter of psychology: 1) there is development that is not social and 2) it is individuals that develop. I will offer an activity-theoretic conception of ‘the social’ and of ‘development’, one that has grown out of nearly thirty years of practice, and whose major intellectual influences have been Marx, Vygotsky and Wittgenstein. Methodological features of the works of Marx and Vygotsky will be presented; for discussion of Wittgenstein, see Holzman, 1997; Holzman and Mendez, 2003; Newman and Holzman, 1996, 1997).

To begin, what are the usual meanings of “social development?” In Austin's terms, what things are we doing with these words? Sometimes the attribute ‘social’ is used to distinguish between what it is you're referring to and some other kind of development, such as biological, physiological, emotional, cognitive on the one hand, or personal, organizational, individual on the other—which, presumably, are not social. Other times the attribute ‘social’ is used to characterize individuals, as when human beings are described as socially situated or socially constituted, or infants are characterized as socially competent, or social from birth. In both cases, the very act of attribution implicates the non-social as what is essential and the individual as primary. And what of development? Most often it is understood as an internal process characteristic of individuals. Most psychologists have abandoned the notion of a “natural” unfolding of development (as in stage theories), accept at least a weak interactionist perspective and agree that development occurs “in a social world.” But few go on to explore the underlying assumptions (and implications) of this claim. The assumption I want to focus on today is that the unit that develops is the individual separated from (i.e., “in”) the world.

There have been many critiques of psychology's unit of analysis, some that delineate how the primacy of the isolated individual has become an

impediment not only to understanding human beings but also to addressing issues of inequality and injustice. Among those who have offered alternative units of analysis are socio-cultural activity theorists like Michael Cole who back in the 70s posited “the person-environment interface” as the proper unit of psychological study (Cole, Hood and McDermott, 1978; Hood, McDermott and Cole, 1980), and social constructionists like Kenneth Gergen and Sheila McNamee for whom “relationality” is the essential human characteristic (Gergen and McNamee, 1999; McNamee and Gergen, 1992).

Within developmental psychology, Erica Burman and John Morss are two “critical deconstructionists” of the concept of development (Burman, 1994; Morss, 1990, 1996). From different orientations, each of them points to developmental psychology's (sometimes subtextual) evolutionary framework as wedding it permanently to a dualism which separates the biological from the social, even in research designed explicitly to do away with that split (such as studies showing infants' predisposition to social interaction).

Further, Burman and Morss examine the politics of theorizing development as adaptation to what is. Taking their critique a step further, I suggest that in order to be ecologically and historically valid, an understanding of development must take into account not only the human capacity to adapt to society (whatever that society is), but also the capacity to reorganize and change it and, thereby, to create history. This clearly moves psychology's task beyond the study of what is into the study and practice of human transformation.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Karl Marx has played a significant role in helping some activity theorists to deconstruct the assumptions of developmental psychology. More than that, for me, he has provided a methodology for the construction of a more activist approach to human development. Especially in his early writings (for example, Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts and The German Ideology), Marx speaks of human development as transformative, not adaptive, and non-dualistically social:

... as society itself produces man as man , so it is produced by him. Activity and mind are social in their content as well as in their origin ; they are social activity and social mind. (from the Economic and Political Manuscripts , Marx, 1967, p. 129)

While almost no one today would deny the social context of development, Marx saw no distinction between the so-called “outside world” and the “inside world” of the human being. For Marx, unlike for most of his followers, not to mention for most psychologists, there was no wall between the subjective and the socio-cultural. He saw the transformation of the world and of ourselves as human beings as one and the same task:

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice. (Theses on Feurbach, Marx, 1974, p. 121).

Thus, for Marx developmental activity is fundamentally social, communal and reconstructive—human beings exercising their power to create and recreate their world, which, he maintains, is inseparable from themselves. Helping people to relate to themselves and each other in this manner entails relating to them as world historic in everyday, mundane matters, that is, as social beings engaged in the life/history-making process of always becoming. This, of course, has profound implications for psychology. Instead of being the study of who people are and how they got that way, a psychology informed by Marx's method becomes the activity of helping people become who they are not. And the activity of becoming is not the activity of an individual; it is a group, social activity. Here is where Vygotsky comes in.

Vygotsky, following Marx, recognized that if human development was a dialectical, socio-cultural-historical process, then the object of psychology's study needed to be not the intra-psychic state of individuals as they are, but the social activity of producing their becoming. This new ontological unit necessitated a further development of Marx's method: "The search for method becomes one of the most important problems of the entire enterprise of understanding the uniquely human forms of psychological activity," Vygotsky wrote. "In this case, the method is simultaneously prerequisite and product, the tool and the result of the study" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 65).

Here Vygotsky breaks with the accepted scientific paradigm, in which method is understood as a tool that, when applied, yields results. With this old model, the relation between tool and result is linear, instrumental and dualistic (tool for result). Vygotsky is proposing a non-linear, non-instrumental, non-dualistic method— a dialectical method—in which the "tool" and the "result" come into existence together. They are neither separate nor identical, but elements of a unity (totality, whole). Vygotsky is relating to the totality, not to any particular. His great contribution to psychology was to bring to it Marx's discovery that human development and learning—on the individual, societal and species levels— involves the transformation of totalities, not the changing of so-called individual particulars. Vygotsky understood human development as a cultural activity that people engage in together, rather than as the external manifestation of an individualized, internal process.

Vygotsky's understanding of the relationship between learning and development is an illustration of his dialectical tool-and-result methodology. Learning was, to him, both the source and the product of development, just as

development was both the source and the product of learning. As activity (as opposed to abstracted concepts), learning and development are inseparably intertwined and emergent, best understood together as a whole (unity). Their relationship is dialectical, not linear or temporal (one doesn't come before the other) or causal (one isn't the cause of the other).

Vygotsky's discovery of what he called the zone of proximal development (zpd) grew out of the use of this methodology in the study of how children learn and develop. He wrote: "Every function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level and later, on the individual level; first between people (interpsychological), and then inside the child (intrapsychological). This applies equally to all voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts. All the higher mental functions originate as actual relations between people" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57).

Thus, the person, the mind, development, learning, psychological processes such as thinking, speaking, remembering, problem solving, and so on, are created or produced through participation in and internalization of social-cultural-historical forms of activity. Vygotsky was neither the first nor the last to notice that children (and adults) can "do more" in collaboration with others. But it was he who specified the social-cultural-historical process by which this occurs.

One of his most wonderful illustrations of the zpd is the learning-development of language. Vygotsky vividly described how babies transform from babblers to speakers of a language through performing. The language-learning zpd is an environment that supports the baby to speak when it doesn't know how to, that is, to perform as a speaker. Vygotsky observed that children become speakers of language through the performance of conversations that they and their caregivers create. The babbling baby's rudimentary speech is a creative imitation of the more developed speaker's speech. At the same time, the more developed speakers complete the baby and immediately accept her/him into the community of speakers. They neither give very young children a grammar book and dictionary to study, nor reprimand and correct them. Instead, they relate to them as capable of far more than they could possibly do; they relate to them as speakers, feelers, thinkers and makers of meaning. This is what makes it possible for very young children to do what they are not yet capable of. In this way, we can say that they are performing beyond themselves as speakers or, as Vygotsky says, "performing a head taller than they are" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 102). When they are playing with language in this way in creating the language-learning zpd, babies are simultaneously performing—becoming —themselves. Performing is a way of taking "who we are" and

creating something new—in this case, a new speaker—through incorporating “the other” (Holzman, 1999, 2000; Newman and Holzman, 1993).

While Vygotsky's research focused on children, his concept of the zpd and his discovery that children develop through “creative imitation” and performance has implications beyond the specifics of child development. The work of my colleague Fred Newman, myself and others has built on Vygotsky's work and extended far beyond the perimeters of child development.

To us, the zpd is a rejection of the individuated learning and development model that dominates psychology. Beyond rejection, however, it offers a positive alternative that respects the relationality and creativity of human life. (Creating) stages for development seems, to us, a more apt characterization of the developmental process than (going through) stages of development.

The zpd does away with developmental psychology's dualism—which it shares with much of modernist thought—that insists on dichotomies such as individual and society, inner and outer, subjective and objective, and suggests a new way of looking at what human beings do. First, the zpd suggests that people do not “come to know the world,” nor do they “act upon it” or “construct” it, for such statements subtextually embody a separation of human beings and the world, resulting in the necessity of employing an abstract explanatory mode in order to understand how “in the world” an individual develops. Second, seeing the zpd as the life space in which and how we all live—inseparable from the we who produce it—frees us from seeking causal connection. The zpd is the socially-historically-culturally produced environment in which and how human beings organize and reorganize their relationships to each other and to nature. It is where and how human beings—determined, to be sure, by sometimes empirically observable circumstances—totally transform these very circumstances, creating something new. The zpd, then, is simultaneously the production of development and the environment that makes development possible—and zpd's can be created by human beings in all arenas of life (Newman and Holzman, 1993).

My work as a developmental psychologist has, for the last 30 years, involved creating zpd's, that is, building practices that grow out the methodology proposed by Marx and developed by Vygotsky. Known as social therapy, it was initially developed by philosopher Fred Newman in the mid-1970s, and continues to be advanced as a method for human development and community building at the East Side Institute for Group and Short Term Psychotherapy, which I co-founded with Newman.

As a psychotherapy, it is practiced at social therapy centers and other clinics, and in schools, hospitals and social service organizations. But more broadly,

the social therapeutic approach is a method for social-emotional growth and learning that is the foundation for dozens of programs in the areas of youth development, in school and outside of school education and mental health (Feldman and Silverman, 2004; Gildin, 2003; Holzman, 1997, 2000; Lobman, under review, 2003; Sabo, 2003); training and practice in medicine and healthcare (Massad, 2003); and organizational development and executive leadership (Salit, 2003). Through training and study opportunities, public events and collaborative projects, the East Side Institute makes it possible for people worldwide to learn and contribute to the social therapeutic perspective and other new psychologies.

Over these nearly thirty years, the unit we work with is the group, not the individual. For example, the task of a social therapy group (to which diverse people have come to get help with emotional pain and problems) is to create itself, or what social therapists call “building the group” (Holzman and Mendez, 2003). Similarly, the ten-year old school-based mental health program at Erasmus High School in Brooklyn, which the students named, “Let’s Talk About It,” works by virtue of the young people continuously creating their group (Feldman and Silverman, 2004). For twelve years, we ran an experimental elementary school, the Barbara Taylor School, in which adults and students from 3 to 13 had the collective responsibility to create their school as a place where all could learn developmentally (Holzman, 1997). The twenty-year-old All Stars Talent Show Network involves 20,000 young people, ages 3 – 21, annually in creating talent shows in poor neighborhoods in New York and other cities. More than a mere talent show, however, the All Stars provides youth the opportunity to create new performances off stage as well as on stage, as they build their organization, make a positive statement in and to their communities, and build new kinds of relationships with their adult supporters and donors (Gildin, 2003).

In every case, the focus of the work and the “group-reflexivity” is, “How well is the group performing its activity?”—and not “How is each individual doing?” This is the relevant developmental question because people—no matter what age—grow by growing the groups they are in.

The claim I am making is that approaching human development from the dualist perspective that separates the social from the developmental and the individual from the group has limited the development of developmental psychology. The practice of my colleagues and I has demonstrated the value—indeed, the necessity—of people organizing themselves as social units in order to carry out the tasks of learning and growing. There are obviously countless other human endeavors in which people become organized as

social units to get a specific job done: manufacturing, team sports, theatrical and other performance activities—not to mention the military. What we have shown through our practice is that such a group approach is also necessary for the emotional and intellectual development of our species.

In social therapy, it works roughly like this. People come into social therapy groups as they come into any therapy or any group—individuated, commodified and alienated. Shaped by an individuated learning-development model, they want help to change and/or feel better as individuals—an impossibility, we believe, following Vygotsky and Marx. In order to grow emotionally this individuated model must be practically critically challenged through the creating of a new socialized helping environment (zpd). What social therapists refer to as “building the group” is the deconstructive-reconstructive process in which people come face to face with the limitations of trying to grow as individuals as they participate in the process of collective growing. New emotional growth occurs by virtue of having learned—through creating it—the activity of how to make groups grow (Holzman and Mendez, 2003).

Making groups grow (and growing by virtue of this collective activity) is accomplished, as far as we can tell, through the exercise of the human capacity to perform. As childhood shows, we are able to become what we are not (if we were not, there would be no development, no civilization, no history). We are performers. But, as Vygotsky has shown, we cannot perform as individuals. As individuals we can, at best, behave. We perform only as a group. People learn how to build the group and to realize that growth comes from participating in the process of building the groups in which one functions.

This new learning, in Vygotskian fashion, rekindles development—development by virtue of the group growing.

I could talk all day about the discoveries our practice has kindled. What I hope to leave you with, however, is simply the knowledge that there is a living alternative out there to the conventions and assumptions of psychology's individualistic bias. An alternative that relates to human beings not as objects to be adapted to the world as it is, but as social beings that can change themselves and the world-- an alternative that has touched and involves many thousands of people in its creation.

What is the “social” in “social development?” Everything.

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