

Sociocultural theory essay sample

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



Sociocultural theory is an emerging theory in psychology that looks at the important contributions that society makes to individual development. This theory stresses the interaction between developing people and the culture in which they live. Sociocultural theory grew from the work of seminal psychologist Lev Vygotsky, who believed that parents, caregivers, peers and the culture at large were responsible for the development of higher order functions. According to Vygotsky, " 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 voluntary attention, to logical memory, and to the formation of concepts.

All the higher functions originate as actual relationships between individuals." Vygotsky was a contemporary of other great thinkers such as Freud, Skinner, and Piaget, but his early death at age 38 and suppression of his work in Stalinist Russia left him in relative obscurity until fairly recently. As his work became more widely published, his ideas have grown increasingly influential in areas including child development, cognitive psychology and education. Sociocultural theory focuses not only how adults and peers influence individual learning, but also on how cultural beliefs and attitudes impact how instruction and learning take place.

Theory

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: Vygotsky is best known for being an educational psychologist with a sociocultural theory. This theory suggests that social interaction leads to continuous step-by-step changes in children's

thought and behavior that can vary greatly from culture to culture (Woolfolk, 1998). Basically Vygotsky's theory suggests that development depends on interaction with people and the tools that the culture provides to help form their own view of the world. There are three ways a cultural tool can be passed from one individual to another. The first one is imitative learning, where one person tries to imitate or copy another. The second way is by instructed learning which involves remembering the instructions of the teacher and then using these instructions to self-regulate. The final way that cultural tools are passed to others is through collaborative learning, which involves a group of peers who strive to understand each other and work together to learn a specific skill. His theory combines the social environment and cognition.

Children will acquire the ways of thinking and behaving that make up a culture by interacting with a more knowledgeable person. Vygotsky believed that social interaction will lead to ongoing changes in a child's thought and behavior. These thoughts and behaviors would vary between cultures (Berk, 1994). The sociocultural theory consists of several elements to help implement it. Consider private speech, where children speak to themselves to plan or guide their own behavior. This is most common among preschoolers, who have not yet learned proper social skills but rather explore the idea of it. Children often use private speech when a task becomes too difficult and the child doesn't know how to proceed. Private speech helps the child accomplish a task. Vygotsky believed private speech changes with age, by becoming softer or being just a whisper. The second element in the sociocultural theory is the zone of proximal development (ZPD). It's the

concept that a child accomplishes a task that he/she cannot do alone, with the help from a more skilled person. Vygotsky also described the ZPD as the difference between the actual development level as determined by individual problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or collaboration with more knowledgeable peers. The result of this process is children become more socialized in the dominant culture and it induces cognitive development (Moll, 1994). In order for the ZPD to be such a success, it must contain two features. The first is called subjectivity.

This term describes the process of two individuals begin a task with different understanding and eventually arrive at a shared understanding. The second feature is scaffolding, which refers to a change in the social support over the course of a teaching session. If scaffolding is successful, a child's mastery level of performance can change, which means that it can increase a child's performance on a particular task. The zone of proximal development has implications for assessment, especially concerning children with learning and behavior problems. Two children can differ substantially in the ZPD's. One child may do his/her best on their own, while the other needs some assistance. Therefore, the ZPD is crucial for identifying each child's readiness to benefit from instruction. Comparison of Vygotsky and Piaget: Vygotsky's ideas and theories are often compared to Jean Piaget, especially his cognitive- developmental theory. They had a conflict explaining that development concepts should not be taught until children are in the appropriate developmental stage. Opposing Vygotsky's zone of proximal development, Piaget believed that the most important source of cognition is

the children themselves. But Vygotsky argued that the social environment is an important factor which helps the child culturally adapt to new situations when needed.

Both Vygotsky and Piaget had the common goal of finding out how children master ideas and then translate them into speech. Piaget found that children act independently on the physical world to discover what it has to offer. Vygotsky, on the other hand, wrote in *Thought and Language* that human mental activity is the result of social learning. As children master tasks they will engage in cooperative dialogues with others, which led Vygotsky to believe that acquisition of language is the most influential moment in a child's life. Piaget's theory emphasized the natural line, while Vygotsky favored the cultural line of development. Vygotsky's theory emphasized the influence of culture, peers, and adults on the developing child. To understand this influence, Vygotsky proposed the "zone of proximal development." This zone refers to the difference in a child's performance when she attempts a problem on her own compared with when an adult or older child provides assistance.

Imagine that a child is having difficulty with writing letters, and with the help of an adult who writes out sample letters or helps the child trace over letters, this same child is able to make progress. The help from the adult is called scaffolding. Just as the scaffolding of a building helps to support it, assistance from adults and peers in a child's environment helps support the child's development. Vygotsky also discussed the importance of cultural tools to the sociocultural approach. These are items in the culture such as

computers, books, and traditions that teach children about the expectations of the group. By participating in the cultural events and using the tools of the society, the child learns what is important in his culture. For example, in the United States a child attends school from about six years of age until eighteen years of age, and thus it is in school that children learn important skills such as mathematics. In some countries, such as in Brazil, however, children learn mathematics via buying and selling candy in the streets of the city.

The Zone of Proximal Development

An important concept in sociocultural theory is known as the zone of proximal development. According to Vygotsky, the zone of proximal development “ is the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers.” Essentially, it includes all of the knowledge and skills that a person cannot yet understand or perform on their own yet, but is capable of learning with guidance. The concept of the More Knowledgeable Other is integrally related to the second important principle of Vygotsky’s work, the Zone of Proximal Development.

This is an important concept that relates to the difference between what a child can achieve independently and what a child can achieve with guidance and encouragement from a skilled partner. For example, the child could not solve the jigsaw puzzle (in the example above) by itself and would have taken a long time to do so (if at all), but was able to solve it following

interaction with the father, and has developed competence at this skill that will be applied to future jigsaws. Vygotsky (1978) sees the Zone of Proximal Development as the area where the most sensitive instruction or guidance should be given - allowing the child to develop skills they will then use on their own - developing higher mental functions. Vygotsky also views interaction with peers as an effective way of developing skills and strategies. He suggests that teachers use cooperative learning exercises where less competent children develop with help from more skillful peers - within the zone of proximal development.

Evidence for Vygotsky and the ZPD

Freund (1990) conducted a study in which children had to decide which items of furniture should be placed in particular houses of a dolls house. Some children were allowed to play with their mother in a similar situation before they attempted it alone (zone of proximal development) whilst others were allowed to work on this by themselves (Piaget's discovery learning). Freund found that those who had previously worked with their mother (ZPD) showed greatest improvement compared with their first attempt at the task. The conclusion being that guided learning within the ZPD led to greater understanding/performance than working alone (discovery learning).

Vygotsky and Language

According to Vygotsky (1962) language plays 2 critical roles in cognitive development:

1. it is the main means by which adults transmit info to children.

2. Language itself becomes a very powerful tool of intellectual adaptation.

Vygotsky sees “ private speech” as a means for children to plan activities and strategies and therefore aid their development. Language is therefore an accelerator to thinking/understanding (Jerome Bruner also views language in this way). Vygotsky believed that language develops from social interactions, for communication purposes. Later language ability becomes internalized as thought and “ inner speech”. Thought is the result of language.

Who is Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky?

Lev Semyonovich Vygotsky was born in Western Russia (Belorussia) in 1896. The work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) has become the foundation of much research and theory in cognitive development over the past several decades, particularly of what has become known as Social Development Theory. Vygotsky’s theories stress the fundamental role of social interaction in the development of cognition (Vygotsky, 1978), as he believed strongly that community plays a central role in the process of “ making meaning.” Unlike Piaget’s notion that children’s’ development must necessarily precede their learning, Vygotsky argued, “ learning is a necessary and universal aspect of the process of developing culturally organized, specifically human psychological function” (1978, p. 90). In other words, social learning tends to precede development. He developed his theories at around the same time as Jean Piaget was starting to develop his theories (1920’s and 30’s), but he died at the age of 38 and so his theories are incomplete. No single principle (such as Piaget’s equilibration) can account for development. Individual

development cannot be understood without reference to the social and cultural context within which it is embedded. Higher mental processes in the individual have their origin in social processes.

Vygotsky's theories also feed into current interest in collaborative learning, suggesting that group members should have different levels of ability so more advanced peers can help less advanced members operate within their ZPD. He graduated with law degree at Moscow University. Vygotsky's first big research project was in 1925 with his Psychology of Art. Vygotsky had no formal training in psychology but it showed that he was fascinated by it. After his death of tuberculosis in 1934, his ideas were repudiated by the government; however, his ideas were kept alive by his students. When the Cold War ended, Vygotsky's works were revealed. Vygotsky has written several articles and books on the subject of his theories and psychology, including Thought and Language (1934). His research in how children solve their problems that surpassed their level of development led Vygotsky to create the Zone of Proximal Development theory. That is one reason why Vygotsky's developmental psychology has influenced education profoundly in Russia.

Vygotsky's theory differs from that of Piaget in a number of important ways:

1. Vygotsky places more emphasis on culture affecting/shaping cognitive development - this contradicts Piaget's view of universal stages and content of development. (Vygotsky does not refer to stages in the way that Piaget does).

2. Vygotsky places considerably more emphasis on social factors contributing to cognitive development (Piaget is criticized for underestimating this).

3. Vygotsky places more (and different) emphasis on the role of language in cognitive development (again Piaget is criticized for lack of emphasis on this).

Lev Vygotsky refers to Elementary Mental Functions:

-Attention-Sensation-Perception-Memory

Eventually, through interaction within the socio-cultural environment, these are developed into more sophisticated and effective mental processes/strategies which he refers to as Higher Mental Functions. For example, memory in young children this is limited by biological factors. However, culture determines the type of memory strategy we develop. E. g., in our culture we learn note-taking to aid memory, but in pre-literate societies other strategies must be developed, such as tying knots in string to remember, or carrying pebbles, or repetition of the names of ancestors until large numbers can be repeated. Vygotsky refers to tools of intellectual adaptation - these allow children to use the basic mental functions more effectively/adaptively, and these are culturally determined (e. g. memory mnemonics, mind maps). Vygotsky therefore sees cognitive functions, even those carried out alone, as affected by the beliefs, values and tools of intellectual adaptation of the culture in which a person develops and therefore socio-culturally determined. The tools of intellectual adaptation therefore vary from culture to culture.

Social Influences on Cognitive Development

Like Piaget, Vygotsky believes that young children are curious and actively involved in their own learning and the discovery and development of new understandings/schema. However, Vygotsky placed more emphasis on social contributions to the process of development, whereas Piaget emphasized self-initiated discovery. According to Vygotsky (1978), much important learning by the child occurs through social interaction with a skillful tutor. The tutor may model behaviors and/or provide verbal instructions for the child. Vygotsky refers to this as co-operative or collaborative dialogue. The child seeks to understand the actions or instructions provided by the tutor (often the parent or teacher) then internalize the information, using it to guide or regulate their own performance.

Shaffer (1996) gives the example of a young girl who is given her first jigsaw. Alone, she performs poorly in attempting to solve the puzzle. The father then sits with her and describes or demonstrates some basic strategies, such as finding all the corner/edge pieces and provides a couple of pieces for the child to put together herself and offers encouragement when she does so. As the child becomes more competent, the father allows the child to work more independently. According to Vygotsky, this type of social interaction involving co-operative or collaborative dialogue promotes cognitive development. In order to gain an understanding of Vygotsky's theories on cognitive development; one must understand two of the main principles of Vygotsky's work: the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD).

More Knowledgeable Other

The more knowledgeable other (MKO) is somewhat self-explanatory; it refers to someone who has a better understanding or a higher ability level than the learner, with respect to a particular task, process, or concept. Although the implication is that the MKO is a teacher or an older adult, this is not necessarily the case. Many times, a child's peers or an adult's children may be the individuals with more knowledge or experience. For example, who is more likely to know more about the newest teen-age music groups, how to win at the most recent PlayStation game, or how to correctly perform the newest dance craze - a child or their parents? In fact, the MKO need not be a person at all. Some companies, to support employees in their learning process, are now using electronic performance support systems. Electronic tutors have also been used in educational settings to facilitate and guide students through the learning process.