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Applying a Sociocultural Approach to Vygotskian Academia: `Our Tsar Isn't Like Yours, and Yours Isn't Like Ours'

Eugene Matusov

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Abstract A Vygotskian approach to education and psychology involves attention to culture, history, society, and institutions that shape educational and psychological processes. Yet, Vygotskian academia itself seems to operate as if academic issues transcend local contexts. Often debates over Vygotsky's legacy in sociocultural international academic communities are carried out, around scholarly texts, without analysis of the (often very diverse) local historical and political situations that may promote such debates. This is especially true in national and international debates about the issues of multiculturalism in education. In my article, I consider cultural-historical and sociocultural paradigms to investigate their ontological projects and dialogical oppositions and consider their relationship between each other.

Key Words cultural-historical, dialogical opposition, equity, ontological projects, sociocultural, Vygotskian academia

Eugene Matusov
University of Delaware, USA

Applying a Sociocultural Approach to Vygotskian Academia: 'Our Tsar Isn't Like Yours, and Yours Isn't Like Ours'

A family of cultural-historical and sociocultural approaches stemming from Vygotskian scholarship—which I will call here 'Vygotskian academia'—insists that psychological and social phenomena are shaped by culture, history, institutions, and practices. For example, from cross-cultural research on guidance (Cole, 1996; Haan, 1999; Rogoff, 2003), there is evidence suggesting that learning is shaped by cultural and institutional practices and values. However, I argue that currently there is a neglect of similar attention to academia itself in general and to Vygotskian academia specifically. Historically, academic practices, institutions, and discourses were formed in a time when social sciences were dominated by positivistic and objectivist conceptual views. These views construe academic empirical and theoretical research as solely shaped by the development and struggle of purely intellectual ideas about the object of study regardless of researchers'

cultural, historical, political, and institutional particularities, in which these ideas are embedded, from which they emerge, and to whom they address and respond. Although Vygotskian academia has been developed within this positivist tradition of academic practices, its conceptual framework contradicts its own ideological practices. I argue that Vygotskian academia should be more attentive to how its own empirical and theoretical research is shaped by culture, history, institutions, practices, and discourses in relation to research done by other Vygotskian (and non-Vygotskian) scholars (and non-scholars).

To give Vygotskian academia its legitimate credit, Vygotskian scholars have discussed their own cultural and even political localities. For example, Vygotsky and Luria (Luria, 1976; Vygotsky, Luria, Golod, & Knox, 1993) defined their own psychological research in the context of 'building a new Soviet person' (see van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, for more discussion); Rogoff (1990) criticizes Vygotsky's ethnocentrism stemming from his intellectual middle-class Jewish upbringing; and Cole (1996) discusses his own research program in the context of educational problems that the USA is currently facing. However, I argue that this attention to the sociocultural conditions of research has not been systematic, programmatic, and, what is more important, relational to other research programs. Let me explain. The attention to the sociocultural conditions of research was either *instrumental*—focusing on sociopolitical tasks and goals motivating the scholars' own research program but not on analysis of their own ontology (i.e., sociocultural circumstances of being), as in the case of Vygotsky, Luria, and Cole—or *negative*—as in the case of Rogoff's or my own (Matusov, 1998) critique of Vygotsky's ethnocentrism. What has been missing, in my view, is *systematic analysis of the programmatic nature* of Vygotskian (and even non-Vygotskian) research as shaped by local cultural, historical, and institutional practices and conditions. In addition, there is a lack of analysis of the *relationship* among these diverse research programs shaped by sociocultural practices and conditions and how the differences in the ontology of these research programs may be responsible for their conceptual differences.

By the programmatic nature of the research, I have in mind what Sartre (1963) defined as an 'ontological project' that is grounded in the participants' influential experiences, social relationship, and deep commitments. This program or project involves an issue of the 'social order' set by the researchers themselves that the researchers try to address in their research—a set of sociocultural 'supertasks' (Stanislavsky, 1952). For example, behaviorists defined the purpose of psychology as 'to predict and control behavior' (Hartmann, 1992); their

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own social order or supertask can be extracted by asking the following questions: *who* was going to predict and control *whose* behavior, *for what purpose,* and *why* was this supertask appealing to the American social scientists from the 1910s up to the mid-1950s prior to the emergence of the 'cognitive revolution' (Bruner, 1990)? Also, what was the social order of the 'cognitive revolution' and what changed in the US society that promoted this 'revolution' and the new social super-task in social sciences? I argue that we should ask similar questions about Vygotskian scholarship. We should see conceptual struggles within Vygotskian academia not just as a struggle of ideas but also as a struggle of diverse social orders, diverse supertasks, and diverse sociocultural conditions under which Vygotskian scholars live.

The purpose of this article is to examine how Vygotskian academia is shaped by its sociocultural conditions and ontological projects. In the title of this article, I use a quote—'Our tsar isn't like yours, and yours isn't like ours'—from an illiterate, unschooled Uzbek elder peasant, a participant of Luria's famous cultural-historical psychological research in Soviet Asia in the early 1930s (Luria, 1976, pp. 108–109). In this episode, this peasant from a remote Uzbek village refused to solve a logical syllogism about white bears in Novaya Zemlya offered by Luria, an educated Russian Jew coming from the Soviet capital, Moscow: 'In the Far North, where there is snow, all bears are white. Novaya Zemlya is in the Far North and there is always snow there. What color are the bears there?' (p. 108). The historical and political background of this episode was very relevant. The beginning of the 1930s were the years of Stalinist forced collectivization of peasants, through which about 20 million Soviet citizens were killed (Solzhenitsyn, 1974). With their cross-cultural research, Vygotsky and Luria tried to demonstrate that the new way of life in the Soviet *kolkhozes* (collective farms), backed by Soviet formal education, promoted changes in the peasants' cognition. The Uzbek peasant seemed to try to communicate to Luria that the riddle of the syllogism does not make sense for his people. Luria (and Vygotsky) apparently did not get this message (Matusov & St Julien, 2004; Rogoff, 1990).

As I will show with my cross-cultural research of Vygotskian scholarship, the Luria–peasant apparent political and sociocultural 'misunderstanding' is not simply a result of Luria's (and Vygotsky's) ethnocentrism, but rather is a manifestation of tension between two Vygotskian paradigms: cultural-historical and sociocultural. These paradigms have different social orders (supertasks, or ontological projects, and addressees) and emerged in different sociocultural (and political) conditions. By claiming this, of course, I do not mean that the

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Uzbek peasant articulated one Vygotskian paradigm (i.e., socio-cultural) while Luria and Vygotsky articulated the other paradigm (i.e., cultural-historical). What I mean is that there was a particular way in which Luria (and Vygotsky) 'othered' or 'addressed' the peasant within their cultural-historical approach *then* and how socio-cultural scholars in the USA and elsewhere are 'othering' the peasant *now*. Luria, working in the cultural-historical paradigm developed by Vygotsky, othered the peasant as a cognitively deficient, while contemporary sociocultural scholars other the peasant (and Luria) as being misunderstood by Luria. I will discuss later the fact that a socio-cultural approach considers the illiterate Uzbek peasant from a remote village as a part of 'we' while cultural-historical researchers (i.e., Luria and Vygotsky) other the peasant as cognitively deficient, as a hegemonic 'they'.

I will also develop a point that it is important to reveal tacit opponents, to whom our approaches dialogically reply. Arguably, Vygotsky and cultural-historical scholars seem to reply to educational and sociopolitical gatekeepers preventing disadvantaged and oppressed people from access to modern tools, practices, and institutions of power (e.g., schooling, literacy); while sociocultural scholars seem to reply to political forces that insist on hegemony of these tools, practices, and institution and on the open but competitive nature of the access.

Research Methodology

My research was prompted by reading two articles in the fall of 1995. One article was written by the South African Vygotskian scholar Ian Moll (1995) and published in the present international academic journal as a commentary on two other articles published in the same issue by US Vygotskian scholars Michael Cole (1995) and James Wertsch (1995). The second article was written by a US Vygotskian scholar, Peter Smagorinsky (1995), and published in the US academic journal *Review in Educational Research*. Both academic peer-reviewed journals are headquartered in the USA. What attracted my attention to the articles was that both articles discussed Vygotsky's legacy but came to the opposite conclusions on the most important issues. I decided to approach this disagreement not conceptually—who is right and who is wrong, or who is closer to Vygotsky's original ideas—but rather ontologically—what sociocultural and historical conditions in their respective countries made their ontological research projects more appealing to them. I then reflected on what to do with this ontological diversity.

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Before I turn to discussion of my findings, let me provide information about my own ontological orientation and background. For about 10 years, from 1978 to 1988, before I left the USSR to emigrate to the USA, I studied and was socialized in the cultural-historical paradigm of Vasily Vasil'evich Davydov, his colleagues and students. In the USA, I was first a graduate student and then a postdoctoral fellow of one of the USA's leading sociocultural scholars, Barbara Rogoff, from 1989 to 1997. These educational and research experiences have provided me with knowledge and deep appreciation of both Vygotskian paradigms. However, I am far from being a neutral bystander in the debate between the two paradigms. I not only consider my own research sociocultural, but I also contributed to direct criticism of the cultural-historical paradigm (Matusov, 1998; Matusov & Hayes, 2000; Matusov & St Julien, 2004; Matusov, Smith, Candela, & Lilu, 2007). I am much closer to the position articulated by Peter Smagorinsky than to the position articulated by Ian Moll (maybe because I have been living in the USA for 19 years). This research is my first attempt to become 'a middleman' in order to develop a historical and ontological perspective for the two Vygotskian paradigms, in which I claim my membership.

Findings

Vygotskian Scholars Conceptually Disagree with Each Other: Vygotsky in the Republic of South Africa and the USA in 1995

For the purpose of this article, I am not going to list all the disagreements between the South African and US Vygotskian scholars, but rather just one example of a disagreement between Ian Moll and Peter Smagorinsky. Vygotsky argued about the two lines of psychological development: the unmediated 'natural' and the 'cultural,' mediated by cultural tools. This idea by Vygotsky can be illustrated with an example of the psychological function of memory. According to some cognitive research (G.A. Miller, 1956), people universally can remember seven, plus or minus two, unrelated bits of information. This type of memory, which Vygotsky called 'natural,' is rooted in the biology of the brain. However, with the help of special cultural mediators, people can remember virtually unlimited items. Vygotsky and Luria argue that traditional cultures mostly rely on unmediated natural psychological functions while advanced Western cultures mostly rely on mediated cultural tools:

An Australian child who has never been beyond the boundaries of his village amazes the cultural European with his ability to orient himself in a

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country where he has never been. However, a European schoolchild, who has completed just one class in geography, can assimilate more than any adult primitive man can ever assimilate in his entire lifetime. Along with the superior development of *innate or natural memory,* which seems to engrave external impressions with photographic accuracy, primitive memory also stands out for the qualitative uniqueness of its functions. (Vygotsky et al., 1993, p. 96)

Vygotsky and Luria argued that in the process of the ontogenetic development of the Western child, the child's psychological functions transform from unmediated-natural to mediated-cultural through the process of socialization and guidance.

The South African scholar Ian Moll agrees with Vygotsky and Luria about this developmental process of socialization and acculturation. He argues against the leading US Vygotskian sociocultural scholars Michael Cole and James Wertsch, who claim the inseparable character of the natural and cultural, the social and individual. Moll argues that the natural exists without the cultural and the individual without the social. Quoting another South African Vygotskian scholar, Ronnie Miller, he writes:

'People and society are not . . . related dialectically. They do not constitute two moments of the same process.' In my view, this is a Vygotskian inclination too. . . . It is also entailed in Vygotsky's **fundamental distinction between the natural and cultural lines of development**. (Moll, 1995, pp. 363–364)[1]

In contrast with Ian Moll (and, arguably, with Vygotsky), the US Vygotskian scholar Peter Smagorinsky insists that the natural is always cultural in human life—a similar sentiment can be found in many US sociocultural scholars, including myself (Cole, 1996; Matusov, 1998; Rogoff, 2003; Wertsch, 1998). It is interesting that Smagorinsky apparently feels uneasy arguing directly against Vygotsky and enrolls Vygotsky himself to argue against Vygotsky's position on the separation of the natural and the cultural (Smagorinsky also added the clarifier 'neo', perhaps to signal the gap between the US sociocultural perspective and Vygotsky's original position). He writes:

From the neo-Vygotskian perspective I am taking, **unadulterated development could only take place in vacuo, a state not possible in human society**. . . . Vygotsky's insistence on the inherent social nature of development challenges the mind–matter dichotomy . . . and **raises questions about the extent to which 'natural' development is possible**. (Smagorinsky, 1995, p. 197)

A scholar of Vygotsky's texts may challenge Smagorinsky's claim about 'Vygotsky's insistence on the inherent social nature of development', but it is *not* my intention here to judge who is more accurate in

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citing and enlisting Vygotsky's original texts for their own purposes. Rather my research goal was to understand the ontological purposes of both Vygotskian scholars in the context of their countries and their ontological projects around 1995. It is enough for me here to indicate the existence of important conceptual disagreements between them. Before I switch to a discussion of their ontological projects and socio-cultural conditions, I want to emphasize similarities between them.

Vygotskian Scholars Agree with Each Other: Equality, Situatedness, and Teleology of Development

Besides the agreement that psychological and social phenomena are shaped by culture, history, institutions, and mediation, both RSA and US Vygotskian scholars focus on **educational equality** for oppressed social groups. In the Republic of South Africa (RSA), Ian Moll was very concerned about the Native black majority's access to quality education. In the USA, Peter Smagorinsky raised an issue of how some minority groups (e.g., Latino/as, Blacks, Native Americans, the white working class) are overrepresented in school academic failure (I will provide supporting quotes from both articles in the next section). What is also important to mention is that both Vygotskian scholars would probably mutually recognize each other's problems of educational equality as they presented them. In other words, Ian Moll would probably agree with Peter Smagorinsky about the problem of educational inequality among oppressed US minority groups as a serious one; while Peter Smagorinsky would probably agree with Ian Moll about the problem of the lack of access to quality education for the black majority in the RSA.

I have found two other important and related issues of agreement between these two Vygotskian scholars: the emphasis on situatedness and on the teleology of development. Both scholars stress the particular and contextual nature of their own scholarship—what may be true for one historical and cultural context and society may not be true for another. As Moll (1995) writes:

> The approach adopted here is deliberately provocative. There are a number of particular emphases in cultural-historical psychology which are **distinctive in the contemporary South African context, and they raise particular challenges to central perspectives held by both Wertsch and Cole.** (p. 362)

Moll seems to argue that he has differences with the two other US scholars, Wertsch and Cole, due to historical and political differences between the Republic of South Africa and the United States of America.

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The social, cultural, historical, and political particularity of the *situ* may lead to different developmental directionality, as Smagorinsky (1995) argues: "The idea of development, however, is problematic in that it suggests some sense of **telos, or path towards a desired, positive, or optimal sense of completion. It therefore raises the question, "development towards what?"'** (p. 194). This sentiment echoes other Vygotskian scholars' insistence on developmental relativism:

> Boys in Micronesia, where sailing a canoe is a fundamental skill, will have a ZPD [zone of proximal development] for the skills of navigation, created in interaction with the sailing masters. A girl in the Navajo weaving community will have experiences in a zone not quite like any ever encountered by the daughters of Philadelphia. (Tharp & Gallimore, 1988, p. 31)

An observant reader may notice that although both RSA and US Vygotskian scholars agreed about the relative nature of development, they put different stresses on what the reason for this relativism is. Ian Moll seems to focus more on a historical and political source of the difference, while Peter Smagorinsky (and other US Vygotskian scholars) seems to emphasize a cultural source. We will explore this issue later.

Sociopolitical ontology in the RSA and USA around 1995

Now, I will turn to the political ontology of the Republic of South Africa versus the political ontology of the United States of America circa 1995. In the RSA, 1994–1995, when Ian Moll's paper was probably written, were the years of the transition from apartheid to the rule of democratic majority. These were the years of big hopes and big worries for diverse social groups in the RSA. It was also a time of violence and separatism among many communities and within communities. In Soweto, for example, there was a low-level civil war between Zulu newcomers and Sowetean old timers. Several Native provinces were talking about separation from the RSA. The black leader of the RSA Communist Party was assassinated by a white Polish immigrant, causing black radical leaders to call for retaliation. Many Anglo Whites were preparing for immigration, while some Afrikaner Whites were preparing for military confrontation. The oppressed groups were demanding redistribution of the country's wealth and private property. The country was closer to a political collapse than ever before (Malan, 1994). Nation-building was the number one task (Mandela, Asmal, Chidester, & James, 2003). Ian Moll (1995) agreed, writing:

> Here is one feature of the contemporary South Africa context which I think has a strong bearing on what cultural-historical theorists *try to do in this situation*: in [post-apartheid] South Africa, we are in a process of

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'nation-building', of forging a common, national cultural identity amongst people (despite their differing ethnicities) who have been artificially separated and indeed forced apart for centuries by the political practices of segregation and apartheid. (p. 362)

There has been another important problem that the RSA has faced with collapse of the apartheid. When the apartheid gatekeeping for oppressed social groups disappeared, the issue of how to provide **institutional access** to socially valuable practices for the oppressed majority and minority groups emerged in its acute form. The problem was (and still is) that many traditional cultural practices of black South African communities are at odds with many cultural practices of modern schooling and the corporate world developed inside of Western societies. The latter practices are indeed the source of modern economic and political power. After apartheid gatekeeping collapsed, many Blacks found themselves not prepared for modern schooling and corporations. In 1995, South African Vygotskian scholars like Ian Moll saw their ontological project as how to help Blacks to overcome their cultural deprivation and transform their traditional practices in order to prepare them for modern schooling and the corporate world. Moll's ontological project seemed to help members of disempowered groups (i.e., Blacks, Coloreds, and Indians) to address their cultural deficits and acquire cultural tools of the dominant power groups (i.e., Anglos and Afrikaners).

It is ironic that Moll (1995) uses a quote from leading US Vygotskian scholars to articulate his own research program:

When cultures are in competition for resources, as they are today, the psychologist's task is to analyze the source of cultural difference so that those of . . . the less powerful group quickly acquire the intellectual instruments necessary for success of the dominant group (Cole & Bruner, 1971, p. 876). (p. 368)

The irony comes from the fact that actually Cole and Bruner in 1971 would probably disagree with South African Vygotskian scholars Moll and Miller circa 1995 (and before) about how to accomplish the goal they all endorsed. Their article was one of the first in the USA (and maybe everywhere) to raise a voice against the notion of 'cultural deprivation' and 'cultural deficits'. Cole and Bruner began promoting a new solution: instead of preparing disempowered communities for the existing mainstream schools and other institutions of power, they suggested that these institutions have to be transformed to be ready to accept members of disempowered social groups with their own background of traditional practices.

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Following Vygotsky, Moll would also probably disagree with Cole and Bruner that this task of changing schooling and other institutions of modern power to accommodate members of communities based on traditional practices is ever possible because he would probably argue that the power of cultural practices is rooted in advantages of the cultural tools. Thus, Vygotsky and Moll could have argued that Cole and Bruner contradicted themselves. Since Cole and Bruner accepted that the existing modern schools and other institutes and practices of modern power are based on more powerful 'intellectual instruments' than ones that are used in traditional societies, it is reasonable to imply that the traditional practices and communities are deficient and deprived since they do not have access to these advanced 'intellectual instruments.' It took some time for both Cole and Bruner to move away from the instrumental determinism that they had initially shared with Vygotsky and Moll to resolve the contradiction (see Wertsch & Youniss, 1987, for more discussion of this issue). Later in the article, I will discuss why instrumental determinism was so attractive for Vygotsky, Moll, and the early Cole and Bruner, from my point of view.

Since the 1970s when racial desegregation school reforms became a part of the US reality, it has become increasingly clear that public (and not only public) schools have systematic educational inequalities. Students from disempowered social groups—Blacks, Latinos, Native Americans, working-class Whites—fail at much higher rates than middle-class white students. Peter Smagorinsky (1995) writes: 'Concerned by the historically disproportionate failure of Latino students in U.S. schools, the researchers endeavored to identify its source' (p. 202). Low test scores, high dropout rates, high rates of medication, low rates of college admission, and so on, are evidence of the problem of disproportional **institutional failure**. I argue that since the early 1970s the problem of disproportional institutional failure rather than the problem of institutional access has become *the leading ontological problem* for many US Vygotskian scholars (and not only US but also Western European).

There is also a growing realization that it is not just a matter of disempowered groups being unfit for conventional schools, but rather that conventional schools are designed in such a way as to produce academic institutional failure on a regular basis. It is 'a zero-sum game' when the success of some students, usually from privileged social groups, is set up at the expense of other students, usually from disempowered social groups. The issue has been raised whether education is the primary goal of conventional schooling at all (Labaree, 1997). In this sense, not only do 'poor students' fail in school,

but 'good students' fail as well (but in a different sense and with different consequences for them) (DePalma, Matusov, & Smith, in press). While the 'poor students' lose the institutional game and all the privileges associated with institutional success (e.g., access to socially prestigious and economically rewarding professions), 'good students' win the institutional game and get institutional rewards but at the expense of failing to become genuinely educated—many of them learn to be alienated from academic learning. Some scholars redefine the problem as how to eliminate the institutional failure from schooling rather than to make sure that the failure is proportionally distributed among culturally diverse social groups (Cole, 1996; De Lone, 1979; Labaree, 1997; Varenne & McDermott, 1998). This development has placed culturally diverse 'others' among 'us' and located the perceived problem of the total and systematic failure within 'our' institutions.

Clash of Cultural-Historical and Sociocultural Paradigms: 'You're Apartheid-Justifiers but You're Ethnocentrists!'

There is a 'cultural' clash between the cultural-historical paradigm promoted by Ian Moll and other South African Vygotskian scholars (and not only South African) and the sociocultural paradigm promoted by Peter Smagorinsky and other US Vygotskian scholars (and not only US). They accuse each other in streams of writing usually associated with non-Vygotskian approaches. The cultural-historical approach ascending directly to Vygotsky focuses on achieving social *equity through unity*:

> There is thus a great deal of emphasis in this country on **'unity rather than diversity'**, not least in relation to cognitive development and both schooling and everyday community life. So, for example, in the context of South African cultural-historical psychology, Ronnie Miller (1984)—its leading local theorist—has described **cultural relativist perspectives as akin to apartheid** ('their most malignant form'). There is also a great deal of **emphasis on the psychological universality and (biological) identity, as opposed to [cultural] difference**, of all individuals. (Moll, 1995, pp. 362–363)

Note that in the context of critiquing the articles by the leading US sociocultural scholars Cole and Wertsch, Moll, using an indirect quote from Miller, accused the sociocultural paradigm of indirect ideological support of apartheid.

The sociocultural approach defines itself as 'neo-Vygotskian' because of a certain perceived discontinuity from Vygotsky and his cultural-historical approach. The sociocultural approach focuses on promoting social *equity through diversity*:

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> From a neo-Vygotskian perspective, then, a sense of telos may be grounded in unexamined cultural assumptions about the ways in which people have **historically developed in particular societies**. That sense of **telos may be inappropriate [ethnocentric] for judging people from other cultures,** as frequently happens when members of technologically advanced societies encounter members of technologically limited societies (e.g., the character-ization of Native Americans as 'savages' by European explorers). (Smagorinsky, 1995, p. 194)

Although Peter Smagorinsky did not directly criticize the cultural-historical approach for being ethnocentric, his critique can be definitely applied to the cultural-historical approach.[2] Indeed, other sociocultural scholars criticized Vygotsky and Luria, the founders of the cultural-historical approach, for being ethnocentric (Cole, 1996; Matusov, 1998; Rogoff, 1990; Wertsch, 1985b).

Table 1 shows the conceptual differences between the two Vygotskian paradigms. The cultural-historical paradigm focuses primary on universal historical development and treats cultures as slices on the Spiral Line of Universal Development of Societies (based on Hegelian

Table 1. Cultural-historical versus sociocultural paradigms: conceptual perspective

Categories	Vygotskian paradigms	
	Cultural-historical*	Sociocultural
Emphasis on	History, the universal historical development	Culture, cultural diversity
History	Universal and progressive	Particular, situated, indeterminate
Culture	A slice of universal historical development	Particular practices and relations
Telos	Known for backward societies	Unknown, emergent
Locus of power	Pragmatically more advanced cultural tools	Relationship among communities and social groups

* I want to warn readers that the terms 'cultural-historical' and 'sociocultural' are polysemic in their modern use by diverse scholars. For example, some US (e.g., Michael Cole) and Western European (e.g., Yrjö Engeström) Vygotskian scholars insist on using the term 'cultural-historical' in describing their own version of the *sociocultural* paradigm (i.e., 'Cultural-Historical Activity Theory' CHAT). However, for the purpose of this article, and the way in which I use the terms, Cole's and Engeström's approaches are arguably much closer to the sociocultural than to the cultural-historical paradigm. Of course, nobody should have exclusive ownership on the term 'cultural-historical' coined by Vygotsky, and probably these scholars have good reason to use this term for characterizing their approaches (see, e.g., Cole & Engeström, 2007), but, in my view, it is useful to separate the terms 'cultural-historical' and 'sociocultural' because, as I show in this article, these terms reflect real and important conceptual and ontological differences in Vygotskian scholarship.

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and Marxist philosophies), while the sociocultural paradigm treats cultures as particular practices and relations developed in a particular society in a given historical situation. In the cultural-historical paradigm, the *telos* of societal development is known for 'backward' societies. The locus of power is located in more advanced cultural tools for the cultural-historical paradigm and in the relationship among communities and social groups for the sociocultural paradigm.

Dialogical Analysis of the Paradigm Conflict among Vygotskian Scholars

At first glance, the difference in sociopolitical ontology between Vygotskian scholars sharing ownership of Vygotsky's legacy puts them on a collision course. However, I argue that this difference alone is not enough to produce this clash of the cultural-historical and socio-cultural Vygotskian paradigms. Paraphrasing Gregory Bateson's (1987, p. 381) famous statement 'one difference is not enough,' I argue that an ontological project of a conceptual paradigm emerges also in response to some **dialogical opposition** to a certain ideology (see Bakhtin & Emerson, 1999) in addition to a response to some socio-political problems.

The Cultural-Historical Approach as Dialogical Opposition to Biological Apartheid Ideology

In the historical context of the Republic of South Africa, such dialogical opposition for the RSA cultural-historical approach was arguably provided by, among others, one of the major architects of apartheid, Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, Minister of Native Affairs of the RSA in the 1950s and then the Prime Minister of South Africa from 1958 until his assassination in 1966. In his infamous speech called 'Good Neighborliness' in 1958, he said:

> Our policy is that which is called in Afrikaans word—Apartheid. And I am afraid that it has been misunderstood so often . . . and could just as easily and perhaps much better be described as a policy of good neighborliness, accepting that there are differences between people. While these differences exist, and we have to acknowledge them, at the same time we can live together and aid one another but that is best done when we act as good neighbors always do.[3]

On a surface level, Verwoerd's respect for diversity sounds very progressive, humane, and democratic. However, he actually meant innate biological diversity in mental, social, and emotional capabilities among different race groups. The consequence of this biologically

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innate race diversity in capabilities is that the non-white racial groups had to occupy very subordinate roles in society. As I argue elsewhere,

> In these racial approaches, behavioral differences among different groups were explained by biological limitations (Gould, 1996). Because of the biological limitations of intellect in non-European subspecies, guidance, if needed, has to be 'biologically sensitive' (e.g., it does not make sense to teach a cat calculus!)—formal education for inferior subspecies was recommended to be segregated, limited (often to training skills useful for slave owners), or not provided at all. (Matusov et al., 2007, p. 461)

Or in the words of Verwoerd himself,

> There is no place for [the Bantu[4]] in the European community above the level of certain forms of labor. . . . For that reason it is of no avail for him to receive a training which has as its aim absorption in the European community. . . . What is the use of teaching a Bantu child mathematics when it [*sic*!] cannot use it in practice? (Robertson & Whitten, 1978, p. 114)

In the tsarist Russian empire, when the internal slavery of Russian peasants was abandoned in the second part of the 19th century, similar sentiments were expressed by tsarist ministers of education with regard to limited education for peasants, workers, and disempowered groups of so-called national and religious minorities (Eklof, 1986). I suspect that in the USSR, Vygotsky (and Luria) replied to similar political gatekeepers as Moll replied in South Africa with their cultural-historical approaches.

I argue that cultural-historical approaches have developed in strong dialogical opposition to these biological apartheid ideologies. In their response, the cultural-historical approaches emphasize biological universalism, biological equality, and biological sameness—'all people are born equal'. The cultural-historical approaches redefine a problem of disempowered social groups[5] as cultural and historical, but primarily as historical and sociopolitical. They see apparent psychological difference between different social groups not as biological but as cultural and historical. Different social groups are viewed to be located on different places of the Universal Line of Societal Development. Technologically advanced societies and social groups associated with them are ahead of technologically backward societies and social groups associated with them. Technologically advanced societies develop new cultural tools that mediate psychological processes in new, more advanced ways. However, it is not necessary to wait until disempowered backward societies and social groups rediscover these new advanced cultural tools. The historical lagging behind of backward societies can be easily bypassed by distribution of modern

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cultural tools among the disempowered population through education and economic, social, and political development. Instrumentalism is the key for cultural-historical approaches because providing access to modern cultural tools is seen as the main pathway for empowerment. Or in the words of North American cultural-historical scholars circa 1970:[6]

A middle-class Dutch child whose parents have recently immigrated to the United States, a Mexican-American child whose parents speak 'Tex-Mex,' and a Negro child growing up in the slums of Washington, D.C., will all enter school handicapped by the fact that the language they have learned to speak at home is different from the language used in school. Yet, by the end of a year, the little Dutch child (who should be the most handicapped) may have mastered English so well that he is indistinguishable, either by his speech or by his school performance, from native-born children in the same class, while the Mexican-American and the Negro child will have made little progress in mastering the language spoken in school, will be far below average in reading and other school attainments, and will be steadily falling farther behind. Clearly, there is more to a language handicap than merely speaking a language or dialect that is 'different' from the official one spoken in school.

The problem is not unique to the English language or to the United States. In Israel, immigrants arrive speaking a variety of languages different from the one used in school. Yet those coming from middle-class European language backgrounds quickly adapt and perform at an adequate level, while those coming from Near-East countries are handicapped in much the same way and to the same degree as disadvantaged children in the United States. It appears that in learning any of the modern languages from educated, articulate parents, a child learns certain rules about how language operates and about what can be done with it that are readily transferred to any other language that he learns. But a child who grows up in a social group that for generations has known only poverty and unskilled employment, where formal education is little known, and where the teaching that is done is done by outsiders, does not learn these language rules, even if the language he learns is fundamentally the same as the language of those who will teach him. He may have learned language rules that are adequate for expressing his wants, for following concrete instructions, for expressing feelings, and possibly far telling stories; but he has not learned the language rules than are necessary for defining concepts, for drawing inferences, for asking questions, and for giving explanations. He has not learned enough about the detailed character of words and their sounds to be able to understand his own language when it is written down a word at a time. For such a child it is not merely the 'He don'ts' and the dropped consonants, or even the limited vocabulary of his language that constitute his language handicap. **By his inability to make full use of language as a tool in learning and thinking, he is prevented from taking full advantage of the opportunities for education and advancement that are at last being made available to him.**

Although this deficit in language mastery has its roots in social conditions that lie beyond the school, from the teacher's point of view it is an

educational deficit that can be treated like any other educational deficit. It can be removed, providing the teacher understands clearly what it is she is trying to teach and providing she uses activities that foster the needed learning. (Bereiter & Engelmann, 1970, pp. 5–6)

Cultural-historical approaches see cultural differences as negative— something that disempowers 'historically backward' social groups— and temporary. According to these approaches, it is desirable and possible to eliminate this cultural difference since the cultural difference is viewed as an obstacle for full empowerment of 'historically backward' social groups and integration of the entire society. The elimination of the historical gaps (heterochronicity) in the societal development and creation of 'a new man' will not happen 'naturally' by itself, but requires efforts of societal transformation and social engineering (Vygotsky, 1994). The South African cultural-historical scholars circa 1995 would probably disagree with the Soviet cultural-historical scholars circa 1930 about what 'a new man' should look like: a full member of a post-industrial capitalist society or a full member of a socialist society. However, they both seemed to insist on elimination of cultural diversity through social engineering via providing access to modern schools and the other technologically advanced existing practices and institutions.

Reading and hearing the work of sociocultural (neo-)Vygotskian scholars praising cultural diversity is probably an unpleasant surprise for cultural-historical Vygotskians. As Ian Moll indicated in his article, it sounds like a betrayal of the equity ideals of the cultural-historical ontological project. Treating culturally diverse students differently in school as the US sociocultural scholars argue using notions of 'culturally responsive pedagogies' (Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lee, 2003; Murrell, 2002; Tharp & Gallimore, 1988) or 'funds of knowledge' (González, Moll & Amanti, 2005; L.C. Moll, 2000; L.C. Moll, Amanti, Neff & González, 1992) appears to reinstitute segregation. Indeed, respect for diversity appears as a call for, at least partial (in time—history—and in space—cultures), segregation for people who see reduction of diversity as the societal goal. A sociocultural approach with its focus on respect for diversity sounds like an ideological resurrection of the ghost of Dr Hendrik Verwoerd, the architect of South African apartheid, to the ear of a cultural-historical scholar!

The Sociocultural Approach as Dialogical Opposition to Neoliberal Ideology

I argue that the sociocultural approach has emerged in part as a dialogical opposition and a dialogical reply to the *economic neoliberal*[7]

ideology that has spread since the late 1960s, reaching its maturity and political strength, probably, in the 1980s in the US (and elsewhere) (Puiggrós, 1999). As in the case of the ideology of biological apartheid, I cannot discuss the ideology of neoliberalism in detail but only focus on aspects that are important for the dialogic emergence of a socio-cultural approach. I argue that these important aspects of neo-liberalism are presented in education as dialogically opposed to a sociocultural approach. Neoliberal ideology emphasizes three mutually related aspects for promoting quality in education: **standards**, **testing**, and **a system of punishments and rewards** (also known as 'accountability') (Hursh, 2000; Milken, 1996; Miner, 1999; Puiggrós, 1999; Torres, 2005).

Neoliberalism is promoted by both business and political communi-ties. Thus, the second educational summit in the fall of 1999 held at IBM headquarters called for 'every state [to] adopt **standards** backed-up by **standardized tests** [and] to set up **a system of "rewards and consequences"** for teachers, students, and schools based on those tests' (Miner, 1999, p. 8). Similarly, the National Alliance of Business, in *Standards Mean Business*, clearly lays out the agenda of standards, assessment, and accountability:

> 'A ***standards-driven*** reform agenda should include content and performance standards, alignment of school processes with the standards, ***assessments*** that measure student achievement against world-class levels of excellence, information about student and school performance, and ***accountability*** for results' (Smith, 1996, p. 4, italics added). (cited from Hursh, 2000)

Political leaders from both major US parties—Democrats and Republicans—follow the neoliberal ideology that recently has been exemplified by the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) educational policy (Torres, 2005). The Presidential challenger in 2004, Senator Kerry from the Democratic Party, emphasized that

> . . . the No Child Left Behind Act is really a jobs act when you think about it. The No Child Left Behind Act says, 'We'll raise **standards**. We'll increase federal spending. But in return for extra spending, we now want people to **measure** . . . whether or not a child can read or write or add and subtract.' (cited from Torres, 2005)

Similarly, during the 2004 vice presidential candidate debate, Vice President Cheney said:

> I think the most important thing we can do is have a first-class public school system. . . . And the president, his first legislative priority was the No Child Left Behind Act. It was the first piece of legislation we introduced. We got it passed that first summer on a bipartisan basis. And it does several things.

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> It establishes **high standards**. It, at the same time, sets up **a system of testing** with respect to our school system, so we can establish **accountability** to parents and make certain that they understand how well their students are doing. . . .We've seen reports now of a reduction in the achievement gap between majority students and minority students. We're making significant progress. (cited from Torres, 2005)

The latter claim by Cheney is rather controversial (see Meier & Wood, 2004).

Like Dr Verwoerd's statement about 'good neighborliness' and his respect for diversity, on the first glance, neoliberal statements about 'no child left behind', 'high standards,' 'testing,' and 'accountability' sound very good (ideology is often designed to make a desired action sound good for relevant others). However, under some scrutiny it is possible to reveal that neoliberal ideology (and practice) in education promotes a comprehensive way of sorting students to prepare them for a strati-fied society and perpetuate social inequalities (a conservative sociol-ogist of education, Sorokin [1927], called school a 'sorting machine'). Although it is possible to argue that this sorting damages all students from all communities by subverting the school's focus from genuine education (as apartheid arguably damaged all communities, see Mandela et al., 2003), it damages more students from disempowered communities. Let me show how neoliberalism harms disempowered communities.

Neoliberalism uses educational standards to ensure the quality of education. However, standardized curricula prioritize the cultural ways of doing things of privileged communities. For example, the Delaware State Language Art Standard (Performance Indicator) for Grade 3 states, '3.119—Students will be able to maintain a focus on a single topic'.[8] Sociocultural research shows that maintaining a focus on a single topic is a cultural pattern of talking and writing common for middle-class white (Anglo) communities. Cultural ways of talking and writing in other communities are often different from this form of straight linear organization (Au, 1993; Heath, 1983; Kaplan, 1966; Michaels & Cazden, 1986). Some African-American working-class communities use multi-topic organizations in their narratives (Heath, 1983; Michaels & Cazden, 1986; Morrell, 2002). The Delaware writing standard puts children from communities using non-single topic narra-tive organization in a disadvantaged position. There is nothing wrong in teaching how to write and talk using a single-topic (linear) organiz-ation of narrative (or any other cultural ways). What is wrong is to equate the quality of writing in general with the use of single-topic organization. First, the culturally biased standard sends the message to

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culturally diverse children that their disempowered communities are (culturally) deficient (and it further sends this deficit message about disempowered communities to students from privileged communities). Second, it burdens culturally diverse children by imposing on them an unjust choice of selecting between loyalty to their home community and to institutional success as defined by the school. Third, since students' success is measured against state curriculum standards, culturally biased standards disadvantage culturally diverse children in regard to the students from privileged communities for whom the state standard reflects the culturally native way of doing things. Fourth, it prevents students from privileged communities from appreciating and learning other cultural ways of doing things that are important for successful functioning in an increasingly diverse society.

Can educational standards be modified to make them fair for all cultural groups? Can state standards become culturally unbiased? No. By definition,[9] standards are tools for homogenization. There cannot be standards for diversity or standards for creativity and innovation. Standards are tools for reducing diversity.[10] Curriculum standards in education are always culturally biased and value-loaded. In some areas, like in the building of reliable machines, standardization is appropriate and necessary. In other areas, like education and human development, standardization is dangerous and it leads to injustice and oppression.

Neoliberalism also promotes **testing** for the assessment of the quality of education. In his Address of the President to the Joint Session of Congress in February 27, 2001, the President of the USA, George W. Bush, a leading neoliberal politician, defended teaching students to the test:

> Critics of testing contend it distracts from learning. They talk about teaching to the test. But let's put that logic to the test. If you test a child on basic math and reading skills, and you're teaching to the test, you're teaching math and reading. And that's the whole idea. (Applause.) As standards rise, local schools will need more flexibility to meet them. So we must streamline the dozens of federal education programs into five, and let states spend money in those categories as they see fit. (Applause.)[11]

Tests are assumed to be an objective measure of the students' knowledge and skills learned in school. However, research on situated cognition—a family branch of the sociocultural paradigm—shows that testing is not a window into the human mind but rather a specific cultural practice in itself (Cole, Gay, Glick & Sharp, 1971; Lave, 1988; Nunes, Schliemann & Carraher, 1993; Rogoff & Chavajay, 1995; Säljö & Wyndhamn, 1993). Those who fail a test may be very proficient in the

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practice for which the test is designed to measure proficiency. Those who succeed in the test may be very inept in the practice. McDermott's (Varenne & McDermott, 1998) study of the bug exterminator examination is interesting to mention here—the fact that the experienced exterminators failed the official proficiency exam because they were proficient in the practice and knew when certain rules were broken, and needed to be broken. Neophyte exterminators played completely by the codes and rules, and passed the examination. The issue of the experienced exterminators learning to take the test 'as a dummy would take it' seems very relevant here. Tests are never fully ecologically valid because they alter the participants' goal of the activity. Reading a book for one's own purpose is not the same as reading for a test, where the test taker is demonstrating his or her reading ability to another person on the person's demand. This is especially the case when tests have high stakes, as neoliberalism advocates. Testing essentially hijacks the students' and teachers' goals from genuine learning to crediting standardized knowledge on the testers' demand. It is interesting that neoliberalism equates evaluation with testing as if testing is the only way or the best way of educational assessment (Puiggrós, 1999). As a cultural practice, testing—asking known-answer questions (like an adult asking a toddler, 'Where is your belly-button?')—is common in white middle-class communities but not so common in other communities (Heath, 1983; Ochs, 1988; Rogoff, 2003). This fact again puts students from culturally disempowered communities in disadvantaged positions.

According to the neoliberal project, after testing results are collected, schools, teachers, and the students who did well in the tests will get rewards in the form of educational resources and monetary prizes, and those schools, teachers, and students who did badly in the tests will get punishments in the form of removal of educational resources and monetary compensations. It appears fair: a good job has to be rewarded and a bad job has to be punished. Schools arguably should face the consequences of their performance (which, of course, is equated with the test results). However, it seems less fair at a second glance. First, according to this type of accountability based on a system of rewards and punishments, 'the rich get richer and poor get poorer'. Those schools that have more educational needs usually will get fewer resources than those that have fewer educational needs. Imagine the same 'accountability' applied to hospitals: those patients who pass medical tests will get more medicine than those who fail the tests. This sounds absurd since medical tests are supposed to guide medical treatment and not to be used for assessing the quality of doctors, patients,

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and hospitals. Similarly, educational assessment arguably has to guide the teachers' instruction and should not to be used for assessment of teachers, students, and schools. Second, a system of rewards and punishments promotes only single-loop and not double-loop organizational and personal learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; Bateson, 1987; Engeström, 1990). Single-loop learning involves adjustment to a static goal (as in a thermostat regulating work of a heater and a cooler to keep the set temperature). Double-loop learning involves a re-evaluation of goals by the participants (Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994). However, in the neoliberal model, the goals are rarely re-evaluated by the participants, since they are controlled externally by the state—which sets the standards—and by the testing companies and the state boards of education that control the tests.

The ideology of neoliberalism promotes a deficit model in its vision of students and their communities who do not fit the neoliberal standards. In its dialogic reply, the sociocultural approach argues that any standard for human activity is inherently biased by its tacit goals and values. Rather than viewing non-privileged communities as deficient and disabled in comparison with privileged communities, a sociocultural approach focuses on demonstrating how they are differently capable.

Reading and hearing the work of cultural-historical Vygotskian scholars (e.g., Bereiter & Engelmann, 1970; Kozulin & Venger, 1994; Luria, 1976; I. Moll, 1995; Scribner, 1968/1992; Vygotsky et al., 1993) diagnosing the cultural deficits and disabilities of disempowered communities and setting the mainstream practices for the norm is very upsetting for sociocultural scholars. It sounds to them as if the cultural-historical scholars align themselves with the neoliberal agenda. Of course, it is neither true that the sociocultural paradigm argues for apartheid, nor true that the cultural-historical paradigm pursues a neoliberal agenda.

Table 2 shows the differences between the two Vygotskian paradigms from the ontological-dialogical perspective: what ontological projects they try to pursue, whom they dialogically oppose, and how they relate to each other. The ontological project of the cultural-historical paradigm is focused on empowering culturally disempowered communities as 'we' are by giving them 'our' powerful cultural tools through education and social development. It emerges in part to a dialogical opposition to ideologies of biological apartheid. The ontological project of the sociocultural paradigm is to recognize the culturally different strengths of disempowered communities and to change mainstream institutions to accommodate these strengths. It emerges in part to a dialogical

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Table 2. Cultural-historical versus sociocultural paradigms: ontological-dialogical perspective

Categories	Vygotskian paradigms	
	Cultural-historical	Sociocultural
Ontological project	Spreading the good: Make 'them' as powerful as 'us' (social engineering)	Being good: 'They' are like 'us' (respect)
Dialogical opposition to	Biological apartheid	Neoliberalism
Accusations by the other	'Perpetuating hegemony'	'Cultural zoos', 'cultural ghettos'
Power of the paradigm	Marginal	Dominant
Othering: How does it perceive the other paradigm?	'Arrogant, disrespectful bullies'	'Old backward ethnocentric stuff'

opposition to an ideology of economic neoliberalism. The cultural-historical paradigm accuses the sociocultural paradigm of promoting 'cultural zoos' (or 'cultural ghettos') for cultural preservation, unwilling to push disempowered communities toward change. In its own turn, the sociocultural paradigm accuses the cultural-historical paradigm of ethnocentrism and perpetuating the existing hegemony. Currently, out of the two Vygotskian paradigms, the sociocultural paradigm situated in the US and other Western countries has more institutional (universities, conferences), economic (assess to grants), and media (journals) power than the cultural-historical paradigm. Interestingly enough and contrary to their conceptual frameworks, the sociocultural paradigm sees the cultural-historical paradigm as historically outmoded and backward (and thus promoting a historical-universalist view often associated with the cultural-historical paradigm). In contrast, the cultural-historical paradigm sees the sociocultural paradigm as an arrogant and disrespectful bully that promotes a relativist view of respect (a view often associated with the sociocultural paradigm). Perhaps these Vygotskians' views of each other can be affected by their own power positions relative to each other.

Discussion

What to Do with This Mess in the Vygotskian Family of Scholars?

My observations on the diverse community of scholars in the Vygotskian tradition (including myself as a member) leads me to extract several approaches to address what to do with these two clashing Vygotskian paradigms. The first is a **fundamentalist** approach

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which asks the questions, 'What did Vygotsky really mean?' and 'Who is more Vygotskian?' It leads to hopeless duels of quotes and mutual accusations of misinterpreting Vygotsky. However, a close analysis of Vygotsky's texts shows that modern cultural-historical theorists (like Ian Moll) are much closer to Vygotsky's original writing than are modern sociocultural theorists. In contrast to the sociocultural scholars, the modern cultural-historical scholars do not need to add the prefix 'neo-' to their Vygotskian allegiance. Their differences with Vygotsky are much fewer in comparison with the sociocultural paradigm. For example, Ian Moll and his South African colleagues would not probably embrace Vygotsky's socialist ideal for 'a new man' as the goal of their social engineering for disempowered social groups in the Republic of South Africa. In this fundamentalist approach of disputing who is closer to the 'Holy Vygotskian texts', I think the RSA wins over the USA and Ian Moll beats Peter Smagorinsky (and other sociocultural scholars like me). But do we, Vygotskian scholars, need this fundamentalist approach? Our priority is in dealing with the important problems and issues at hand, rather than to decide who is closer to a text.

Another common approach in academia is a **positivist** one, which asks the question, 'Who is right?' However, this question begs further reflection: 'right' for what? As I have shown, there are different historical-political situations, ontological projects, and dialogical opponents for both paradigms. I think there is a stalemate between the paradigms with regard to truth-in-the-making.

The third possible approach is a (neo-liberal) **capitalist** one, inviting the two paradigms to 'compete in the global marketplace of ideas'. Since the USA and Western countries control more of the world infrastructure, including the academic economy (e.g., more academic journals are in English, often editors of international academic journals send the manuscripts to the USA or Western reviewers, many scholarship grants originate in the USA or Western countries), I think that the sociocultural paradigm is on the 'winning side' over the cultural-historical paradigm for academic resources.

I will call the fourth approach '**US middle-class approach no. 1**'. It essentially says, 'Let's be nice to each other and avoid debates'. It reminds us that Vygotskian approaches often operate in a rather hostile mainstream academic environment and it is better to ally and co-operate with each other, focusing on our common themes and common roots, rather than to fight. The synergy that can result arguably can bring more benefits to both approaches than can a public fight. I argue that although this approach to disagreement has political merit, it leads

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to a difficult to resolve disconnection among the scholars of the two paradigms.

The fifth approach can be called half-jokingly '**US middle-class approach no. 2**'. As in the dispute between the phonic and whole-language approaches in literacy, it calls for a compromise: 'Let's compromise by mixing and balancing the two paradigms'. I argue that this approach is a wishy-washy one that will have the consequence of confusing the academic rigor of both paradigms and weakening them in the context of greater academia. Fortunately, this approach is too difficult to sustain due to the difference in ontologies behind the paradigms.

Mapping the Situated Teleology of Our Projects for Equality

Finally, I see a **sociocultural** approach to the problem of the two clashing Vygotskian paradigms. It suggests, 'Let's debate the situated teleology of our ontological projects for equality'. In this approach, with its focus on the issue of equality, deeply shared by both paradigms, I think that *equality wins.* This approach involves several important elements. First of all, we, the Vygotskian scholars of both the cultural-historical and sociocultural paradigms, have to pay attention to and analyze our own academic ontologies. We cannot simply raise research questions and situate them in academic literature, as is often done traditionaly. We have to situate our research questions in our ontological projects and dialogical opponents and relate our own ontology with the different ontological projects of other scholars. As we saw with examples of the articles by Ian Moll and Peter Smagorinsky, it is not new for Vygotskian scholars to describe their own ontological projects. What can be new, however, is to discuss our own ontological projects with regard to the ontological projects of other scholars.

Because of the discussed differences in ontology, we, Vygotskian scholars, may not have the same visions and shared goals and may not address the same opponents.[12] Rather than focus on shared visions and shared interpretation of Vygotskian texts, we can focus on shared ontological problems and historical tragedies—the approach advocated by many postmodern scholars (Dershowitz, 2002; Fullan, 1993; Hargreaves, 1994; Matusov, 1999). Although we may have different solutions for the problem-tragedies, we are united in recognition of and struggle against them: apartheid, lack of access to social institutions, and systematic institutional failure.

Furthermore, I think we should push harder in presenting our partial truths to each other's paradigm for its honest dialogic response. I see a partial truth in the sociocultural paradigm in its insistence on the long

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overdue societal rehabilitation of and respect for cultural practices of non-mainstream others. By now, we have accumulated enough evidence suggesting that 'winning' cultural practices are not necessarily functionally better than 'losing' cultural practices (see Wertsch, 1991, for an example of the history of the modern QWERTY keyboard, or Hutchins, 1983, for his discussion of Micronesian traditional navigation). I think that the cultural-historical paradigm has to have the guts to face this difficult (for itself) truth.

I see a partial truth in the cultural-historical paradigm in its strong recognition of competition among communities and cultural practices for resources in which some cultural practices and cultural tools are historical winners and some are historical losers. This competition exists in people's lives here and now. It can be condemned but it cannot be ignored or postponed. For example, we can validate and celebrate the strengths of oral-based cultures (Matusov & St Julien, 2004) or mapless naval navigation (Hutchins, 1983), but in the competition for resources, print-based cultures and map-based navigation are currently the winners (at least for now). Sociocultural scholars have to face up to this bitter truth in their research.

In this recognition of and dealing with these mutual partial truths, difficult for each paradigm, I see a bigger contradiction between cultural preservation and cultural transformation in the context of the cultural competition for resources. On the one hand, it is very tempting, as cultural-historical scholars suggest, to teach disempowered social groups the cultural tools of privileged communities so they can become 'mainstream' and share power. On the other hand, the problem of inequality, as sociocultural scholars argue, can be in the nature of the power itself which regulates the cultures' competition for resources. The question remains open: can (Delpit, 1995, and a cultural-historical approach) or cannot (Lorde, 1984, and a sociocultural approach) 'the master's tool' dismantle 'the master's house'?[13]

What do you think?

Notes

 1. From here on in the article, boldface type is added by me to focus the readers on the themes that I discuss.

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2. When Peter Smagorinsky kindly read this article, he commented, 'actually I'd say that my critique of Luria in the 1995 article is where I directly critique the cultural-historical approach for being ethnocentric' (P. Smagorinsky, personal communication, December 1, 2005).

3. The Johannesburg Museum of Apartheid.

4. 'Bantu' means 'people' in the Zulu language. Verwoerd used the Zulu word to mean the Native black people of South Africa.

5. See Du Bois (1961) for discussion of the issue of how a member of a disempowered group feels him- or herself to be 'a problem' for a society.

6. It would be interesting to know if Carl Bereiter and Siegfried Engelmann agree in 2008 with what they wrote in 1970.

7. The current political terminology is very confusing, although this confusion may be unavoidable. Many current *political* neoconservatives like the President of the United States George W. Bush and the Vice President Dick Cheney are *economically* neoliberal. Many, if not all, US political neoconservatives are economically neoliberal. However, many centrist Democrats in the USA also lean more and more toward economic neoliberalism. Good examples of this are the former President Bill Clinton and the 2004 Presidential challenger John Kerry (Stiglitz, 2002). In my view, the ideology of economic neoliberalism has heavily penetrated politically centrist liberals.

8. http://www.doe.k12.de.us/DPIServices/Desk_Ref/tdr_k5_ela.pdf.

9. According to the Oxford dictionary, the word 'standard' originates from the Germanic word '*standhart*' (stand hard)—a special token, ensign, used during a war to mobilize troops by appealing to the group's solidarity (unity).

10. I disagree with Sizer (1992), who separates the notions of 'standard' and 'standardization,' in the context of this discussion. Indeed, although setting minimum standards does not force people to be exactly the same (in this regard Sizer is right: standards do not necessary force comprehensive cloning), it still forces homogenization. What can be minimum standards for creativity, diversity, or innovation?

11. http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2001/02/20010228.html.

12. From this point of view, it would be interesting to investigate a long-standing disagreement between Vygotsky's semiotic approach and Leont'ev's activity approach (Wertsch, 1985a).

13. It is interesting to acknowledge that neither Delpit nor Lorde belongs to Vygotskian academia, at least in a narrow sense of building on Vygotsky's scholarship. The tensions that I described in this article seem bigger, transcending Vygotskian academia.

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Biography

EUGENE MATUSOV is Professor of Education at the University of Delaware. He was born in the Soviet Union. He studied developmental psychology from Soviet researchers working in the Vygotskian paradigm and worked as a schoolteacher, then immigrated to the United States, where he got his Ph.D. from the University of California in developmental psychology. His research and educational interest is studying how to design safe learning environments (informal and formal) without failure for all students. He uses a sociocultural approach in his research. In this sociocultural approach, learning is viewed as transformation of participation in a sociocultural practice. Sometimes due to

political, economic, historical, social, and cultural reasons, a person's access to meaningful participation in practices is blocked and desirable learning is arrested. He is interested in the process of how the access to participation in valuable practices meaningful for a learner is systematically denied and how people learn to become 'disabled' in institutional settings (especially, in schools) as a result of this. ADDRESS: School of Education, University of Delaware, Newark, DE 19716, USA. [email: ematusov@udel.edu]