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Response: Dialogue with Sociohistorical Vygotskian Academia about a Sociocultural Approach

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Abstract I argue that all four commentators belong to the cultural-historical paradigm that I described and discussed in my original article, based on their opposition to a sociocultural approach, and their focus on developmentalism, the hierarchy of values, and the value of monism, agreement, and oneness. I provide my replies to their charges against a sociocultural approach especially of relativism. Finally, I discuss new problematics of cultural contact with power asymmetry for the cultural-historical paradigm that I have noticed in the commentaries.

Key Words cultural-historical approach, developmentalism, hierarchy of values, monism, ontological project, pragmatic postmodernism, sociocultural approach

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Dialogue with Sociohistorical Vygotskian Academia about a Sociocultural Approach

> *We lack the power of guessing*
> *How lives our word in another's mind . . .*
> (Fyodor I. Tutchev, 27 February 1869;
> translated from Russian by Tatiana Sazonova)

I am very pleased to read four critical and informative international comments coming from Australia (Benjamin Bradley), Estonia (Aaro Toomela), Denmark (Jytte Bang), and the Russian Federation (Victor Allakhverdov and Mikhail Ivanov). I am glad that my article generated interest and a desire to reply—this is one the important goals of my paper, to start a dialogue across different Vygotskian 'camps.' Unfortunately, and this might be a stroke of bad luck for me (unless it is a result of disinterest from sociocultural scholars in issues that I tried to raise), all four important comments came from what I would call a 'cultural-historical' camp of Vygotskian academia (a heuristic term that I used in my original article) and not from a 'sociocultural' camp.

I am not sure if all four rather diverse commentators agreed with me that they belong to a family of cultural-historical approaches, but

the following are my observations justifying my claim. I have noticed several common and, arguably, mutually related themes in the four commentaries that present the 'birthmarks' of a cultural-historical camp (although they might be emphasized and shaped differently in specific commentaries). These cultural-historical themes are the following:

1. The commentators' conceptual and dialogic *opposition to a sociocultural approach*.
2. *Developmentalism*: a trend of explaining psychological (and social) phenomena in developmental terms as a kind of progression. The commentators differed in their versions of developmentalism: Toomela (2008) apparently provided a 'hard' version of developmentalism with known developmental goals, while Bang (2008) provided a 'soft' version of developmentalism arguing for emergent developmental goals. I agree with Jytte Bang's keen observation that the issue of development is rather problematic in a sociocultural approach (at least, in my interpretation)—see my latest work addressing this issue (Matusov, DePalma, & Drye, 2007).
3. *Hierarchy of values and opposition to relativism*: I think that this issue represents an interesting tension, if not struggle, in the presented commentaries. It is, after all, an important theme in Vygotsky's heritage. However, the commentators are also aware of the tragic history of the 20th century that this position was keenly associated with, if not responsible for. Bang (2008) discusses Stalinism, Toomela (2008) asks 'right for what?,' Bradley (2008) talks about oppression of Australian Aborigines in the government's delivery of 'aid,' Allakhverdov and Ivanov (2008) bring in the example of the fall of mighty Rome. However, at the same time (but in different ways), they emphasize a strong possibility and desirability of universal judgment: *the* dialectical materialism (for Bang), *the* logic and experts (for Toomela), *the* practice (for Bradley, please notice his use of singular for the term 'practice' in his commentary), and *the* logic (for Allakhverdov and Ivanov). Although the commentators might disagree with each other about what exactly constitutes *the* hierarchy of values, they might agree that such hierarchy exists and should exist (I will be waiting their response about my claim impatiently). My suspicion, grounded in my observations of the four commentaries, is that although cultural-historical folk are historically aware of problems with the hierarchy of values (in contrast to Vygotsky), they are afraid that rejection of the universal (not local) hierarchy of values might lead to a position of moral relativism

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nicely formulated by Allakhverdov and Ivanov by 'everything flows' (in their formulation, I hear a reference to Dostoevsky's novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, in which the Great Inquisitor [the Devil] suggests to Ivan Karamazov that if there is no God—the ultimate authority—everything is allowed). All four commentators seem to see a sociocultural approach (or, at least my interpretation of it) as guilty of this morally irresponsible relativism.

4. *The value of agreement and oneness*: I found it interesting that all four commentators misattributed to me a desire to unite the two Vygotskian camps. Of course, this could be partially a problem of my poor articulation,[1] but only partially. My position and argument in the article were that this is not only impossible but also undesirable. The issue here, however, is not my position but the apparent fact that the four commentators think that is possible and desirable. Again, they might differ on what ground such a 'unified science of psychology' (Benjamin Bradley) can be achieved, but they seem not to doubt that it is possible and desirable. Conceptually this unity is promoted through the *monism* of the hierarchy of values (see above).

The fact that there are no comments from what I would heuristically call 'a sociocultural camp of Vygotskian academia' puts me in a rather uncomfortable position of defending it and talking on its behalf. This might promote unnecessary idealization of a sociocultural approach that is difficult for me to avoid here. Despite my strong conceptual affiliation to a sociocultural camp, I tried to challenge it in my article as well. Let me turn to critical issues and challenges that my cultural-historical colleagues raised in their response: (1) to the sociocultural approach that I presented in the article; and (2) to my project of how to engage the two camps of Vygotskian academia in a mutually useful dialogue.

Addressing Challenges of Cultural-Historical Scholars from a Sociocultural Perspective

The Problem of Conceptual-Ontological Determinism

Several commentators criticized my focus on the diverse ontology of Vygotskian academia (again, I want to emphasize the heuristic nature of this term). Thus, Bang (2008) wants to 'loosen a little the close tie . . . between theoretical positions and ontological ones' (p. 46) while Allakhverdov and Ivanov seem to claim scientists' independence from their ontology. They suggest that I too tightly linked researchers' ontology and their conceptual framework in my discussion. I think it

is a valid criticism of my article. I did not discuss sufficiently the issue of the relationship between ontology and conceptual framework. This lack of discussion might produce a wrong impression in readers that I want to promote conceptual-ontological determinism—a version of vulgar Marxism according to which one's being fully determines one's mind. This position is not just conceptually and empirically wrong, but, as Bakhtin nicely argued, morally irresponsible because it seeks an 'alibi in being' (Bakhtin, Holquist, & Liapunov, 1993)—moral excuses for one's own (irresponsible) actions. I am with Bang, Allakhvedov, and Ivanov, who see a certain conceptual autonomy of scholars from their ontological being. Bakhtin (1999) and his colleague Medvedev (1985) strongly and convincingly argued against the vulgar sociological analysis of literary authors' lives to understand the product of their creative act. The lives and scholarship of Bakhtin and Vygotsky themselves represent an empirical case against such conceptual-ontological determinism. Bakhtin and Vygotsky started their scholarships roughly in the same time of the early 1920s in the same country, the USSR, but they developed very different conceptual frameworks. It would be naïve and wrong to expect every scholar coming from a certain place (e.g., the US) to be a sociocultural scholar while from another place (e.g., South Africa) to be a cultural-historical scholar (despite possible aggregated patterns of 'statistical correlations').

However, I would not go as far as Allakhverdov and Ivanov (2008) and claim the independence of scientists' conceptual framework from their ontology (if that was what they meant). The key for me is the notion of a scholar's *ontological project*: ontological problems of the scholar's time and place (as defined by the scholar) that the scholar found important to address in his or her scholarship for his or her 'relevant others'. As Allakhvedov and Ivanov correctly pointed out, there may be little use in examining the relationship between Karl Marx's Jewishness and his theory because it might be irrelevant to his ontological project (unless shown to the contrary). However, the same point might not be true for the Jewishness of Lev Vygotsky, who, as Barbara Rogoff (1990) pointed out, prioritized print literacy as the highest form of cultural thinking. The practice of print literacy (and Talmudic scientism) was very important for the centuries-long survival of Jewish religion and culture in the politically hostile environment of the Jewish Diaspora. As I argued in my article, I see Vygotsky's ontological project in socializing children and adults from traditional cultures (he and Luria called them 'primitives,' which was arguably the 'standard talk' in the 1920s reflecting 'the standard

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colonialism and standard ethnocentrism' of these times among the Western middle class) into certain middle-class 'cultured' adults. It is an interesting question raised by Rogoff about how much Vygotsky's (and Luria's) images of ideal middle-class community were shaped by their Jewish upbringings. (I treat Rogoff's point as a hypothesis and an interesting insight rather than definitive proof.)

In contrast to cultural-historical scholar Vygotsky's ontological project, that of the US sociocultural scholar Michael Cole is, in my view, to empower diverse communities by transforming educational practices and institutions, as exemplified in his famous '5th Dimension' project (Cole, 1996). Of course, there is a huge and important similarity between Vygotsky's and Cole's ontological projects (which makes both 'Vygotskians')—both are genuinely concerned that all people could successfully access socially valuable practices through education and otherwise (paraphrasing the US popular political slogan, they want 'no person left behind'). However, there are important differences between their ontological projects: Vygotsky seemed to embrace his version of middle-class, literacy- and science-based, culture as universal and inclusive, while Cole seems to consider a middle-class culture as particular and essentially exclusive (there are other important differences between cultural-historical and sociocultural ontological projects that I discussed in my article).

My general proposal in the article was to engage Vygotskian scholars in discussion about our ontological projects grounded in our ontological circumstances. Bradley (2008) made a good point by challenging the idea that 'we are so transparent to ourselves that it is possible "to pay attention to and analyze our own academic ontologies"' (p. 42). The latter quote is a quote from my article. But I do not assume that our ontological project and circumstances are easily accessible to us. Bakhtin (1986) once repeated an old school joke that Ancient Greeks did not know the most important thing about themselves—the fact that they were ancient. Like Bakhtin, I think our ontological projects and ontological circumstances can be known not because they are easily available to us but because dialogue with others—people who have different ontological projects and circumstances than we do—can reveal it (Matusov, Smith, Candela, & Lilu, 2007). In this sense, I am very pleased with our ongoing dialogue with cultural-historical scholars who have different ontological projects than I do and, thus, have many keen comments and observations about my ontological project that were invisible to me in the past (although I might always disagree with their negative judgments about their keen observations). For example . . .

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The Anti-Hegelianism of a Sociocultural Approach

Jytte Bang (2008) made a very keen observation about my anti-Hegelianism in particular, and that of sociocultural folks in general. I applaud her observation that the Hegelian notion of 'concrete' and the sociocultural notion of 'context' (and 'situatedness') are very different. However, this conceptual difference is not caused by ignorance of Hegel on the side of sociocultural folks, as she suggests, but, at least in my case, by active rejection of Hegelism (and Marxism) after serious studies.

In brief, according to a sociocultural approach (in my version of it, of course), context and situatedness involve social relations mediated by the participants' goals, discourses, and affordances (physical, cultural, institutional) that bind and enable human actions. This notion of context, indeed, has little to do with the Hegelian-Marxist 'ascending from the abstract to the concrete', behind which, in my view, is hidden an often uncritical imposition of certain values brought by Hegelian authors (Young, 1990). For example, in Bang's interesting case of young Muslim women and girls wearing religious headscarves in public school in Denmark, from a sociocultural perspective, there is no *a priori* meaning and 'solution' and even problem of the phenomenon (interestingly enough, so far it is non-issue in the US, as far as I know, in contrast to Europe). In my view, what might be conceptually and practically useful is not a dialectical analysis of the religious practice of headscarf wearing but a dialogical analysis of historically concrete public discourses and their politics that occur in Denmark now (with its relevant history in mind). A cross-cultural study of the situation in US and Europe (e.g., UK, the Netherlands, France, Denmark) could also be a good idea.

Yes, I am an anti-dialectician as well. This confession does not make me 'mechanical,' as Bang suggested. Bakhtin commented that dialectics is the smartest form of excessive monologism. He also claimed that dialectics is murdered dialogue that is attempted to be squeezed into the consciousness of one person (i.e., the dialectician).

> Dialogue and dialectics. Take a dialogue and remove the voices (the partitioning of voices), remove the intonations (emotional and individualizing ones), carve out abstract concepts and judgments from living words and responses, cram everything into one abstract consciousness—and that's how you get dialectics. (Bakhtin, 1986, p. 147)

I found Bakhtin's insights about dialectics very useful. Like Bakhtin, I appreciate the 'smartness' of dialectics—'Dialectics is born of dialogue in order to return to dialogue on a higher level' (Bakhtin,

1986, p. 162)—and also, like him, I worry about its excessive mon-ologism, which is also mastered at its best.

'Who Is Right?': On Sociocultural Relativism

All four cultural-historical commentators accused me (and a socio-cultural approach) of relativism. In my view, a sociocultural approach promotes particularism[2] and pragmatism but not radical (moral) relativism. First, it is not true that from a sociocultural perspective 'everything flows,' as Allakhvedov and Ivanov (2008) succinctly put it. Sociocultural folks argue that decontextualized statements like 'what is a tomato: vegetable or fruit?' or 'what is 2 + 2?' do not make much sense *per se*. Tomato can be a vegetable for a cooking practice or a fruit for biology science practice (Whitson, 1997, 2007). Mathematicians know very well, but math teachers often do not, that the linear math model, in which 2 + 2 = 4, can be applied to some objects and not to others: two apples and two apples usually are four apples but two friends (or molecules) plus two friends (or molecules) might not be four friends (or four molecules; for some objects 2 + 2 can be even 5 or 11!). Similarly, for sea navigators, two stars can be close to each other and be a part of the same star constellation, while for an astrophysicist the same stars might be so far from each other that they belong to different galaxies. So, decontextualized questions without a reference to the practice providing the context (what bounds human action), questions like 'what is really a tomato: vegetable or fruit?' or 'what is really 2 + 2?' or 'are the two stars of the same constellation really close to each other?' do not make sense. The good sociocultural answer is 'It depends on practice.' However, when a practice *is* defined, one answer can be unambiguously better than another one. Meaning is constituted through practice and is thus relative to a practice. It can be called 'prag-matic postmodernism' or 'pragmatic relativism'—I do not mind.

Second, sometimes, different practices collide with each other, claiming objects and subjects as their own at the same time. Each practice defines its own truth and its own 'the best answer.' Yjrö Engeström and his colleagues (e.g., Engeström, Miettinen, & Punamèaki-Gitai, 1999) have developed an analytical approach based on their version of activity theory (heavily rooted in cultural-historical approaches and Hegelianism but still belonging to a sociocultural camp, in my judgment). In brief (and, probably, in injustice to them), Engeström and his colleagues suggested that the contradiction between the practices can be solved by special, usually institutional, mediation.

Let me give an example from education (my field). One problem with traditional education (e.g., traditional schools) is the contradiction

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between two practices of assessment: formative and summative. From an inherently educational point of view, students' mistakes have to be highly valued and even encouraged to be expressed by the teacher because they provide 'windows into the students' minds' and can guide the teacher as to how to form sensitive guidance for each student. In formative assessment, students' mistakes are teaching opportunities for the teacher and learning opportunities for the students. From this point of view, it is important to create a safe learning environment, in which students can make mistakes without being punished. However, from the point of view of practice, in which students will soon find themselves as practitioners, mistakes can be very costly, punishable, and not desirable at all. A patient will not appreciate and congratulate his or her surgeon for a wonderful learning opportunity when the surgeon admits making a mistake during surgery. Summative assessment can be necessary to sort people in and out of practice based on their competence and to punish them for their mistakes.

The problem starts when both formative and summative assessments are introduced in the traditional classroom by the same teacher. This creates a classical schizophrenic situation: on the one hand, the teacher encourages students' answers, public exposure of their thinking, and mistake making; but, on the other hand, the same teacher punishes the student for making mistakes during tests, exams, and graded assignments. Engeström's activity models using his famous triangles might help practitioners mediate these two conflicting practices through some organizational change. For example, summative assessment of the students can be made by some agency (e.g., a future employer) and never by the teacher, who can only do formative assessment—an institutional practice of some innovative schools (Rogoff, Bartlett, & Goodman Turkanis, 2001).

Third, the real trouble for a sociocultural approach (and the most interesting case), in my view, begins when not just crossing practices are in conflict but their underlining values are incompatible. In this case, Engeström's triangles—'the bird-eye view from above' on contradicting practices—become impossible, in my view. In this regard, I agree with Bradley about serious challenge that these practices with conflicting values bring to scholars, but I respectfully disagree with his claim that: 'At the same time socioculturalism implies that it is possible to transcend all ordinary cultural investments in a supra-human pan-cultural "view from everywhere" (cf. Haraway, 1988)' (p. 41). This implication is wrong—at least, I am not that sociocultural scholar. The commentators brought many examples of such situations of crossing

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practices with conflicting values. Let me give another example from education. The modern state of the economy is arguably not interested in good-quality education for all. There are just not enough good jobs for everybody (by the way, capitalism is nothing to do with that—it is the same under socialism—although capitalism complicates the matter). Under a very liberal assessment, the number of 'good' jobs that are not highly routinized and require creativity from their participants on a systematic basis is less than 20 percent in the US (Reich, 1992, 2001). The other 80 percent of employees have to deliver pizza, work on assembly lines, serve at the counter, wait on tables, and so on. Arguably, there are forces coming from the economy that try to put the brakes on genuine education for all (Labaree, 1997). These forces are not conspiratorial, but rather they constitute a network of public and private practices, institutional policies, and even private motivations. For example, many middle-class folks (including, probably, many of us, academicians) want a good education for our children and we often use our resources to provide it to our children at the expense of children who do not have this advantage by looking for good schools, moving to a safe neighborhood, buying intellectual materials, driving them to after-school activities, and so on. The value of competition for scarce good job places for our own children and the value of good education for everyone are in conflict with each other. This conflict of values acquires all of us in some personal way. And this might not be the most difficult case. Diverse practices with their conflicting values literally tear people and communities, in which they participate, apart. They place a moral burden of high personal responsibility on their participants. These practices with conflicting values push us, their participants, into the area of what Bakhtin (1999) seemed to call 'damned ultimate questions'. I should admit that these types of difficult cases when crossing practices have conflicting values are a part of my ontological project.

I am very sympathetic with Allakhvedov and Ivanov's (2008) claim that 'the problem that Matusov outlines is impossible to solve in scientific terms' (p. 77). I agree that the problem cannot be solved by a scientific criterion or by a scientific method or even by a scientific discourse as a whole. In the case of conflicting values, bravery, responsibility, will, political actions, and diversity of discourses are also needed (cf. the discussion in Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, of why Marxism cannot be scientific). Nevertheless, sciences (plural) can and must help participants in colliding practices by providing special disciplinary reflection, but the sciences cannot solve problems for participants. Thus, this brings us to the importance of the ontologically reflective scholars.

Conclusion: New and Emerging Themes in Cultural Psychology

Is a dialogue between cultural-historical and sociocultural Vygotskian academicians possible? Can it be useful for both sides? Judged by the presented exchange of commentaries, I remain moderately optimistic. The dialogue definitely is a challenge for both sides. First, obviously, as I argued in my article and is evident from the commentaries, the two sides have different ontological projects for their scholarship: they view differently what problems are important. Second, as I tried to show above, a conceptual monism inherited by a cultural-historical approach leads to the excessive monologism of their scholarship and the strong value placed on agreement, which makes a dialogue difficult.

On the other hand, I found myself engaged in the interesting and useful dialogue with my four cultural-historical colleagues. As I showed above, they helped me better to see and articulate my own ontological project as different from theirs. Their challenges are also helpful in pushing my ideas forward (I hope other sociocultural scholars would agree with that—but let us hear what they want to say). I hope also that my article and response to their commentaries was useful and thought-provoking for them too. Finally, to my big surprise I have learned from all four commentators that we, the entire Vygotskian academia, seem to be engaged in a new aspect[3] of the zone of 'damned ultimate questions' (Bakhtin, 1999). This new aspect can be tentatively defined as 'a problem of cultural contact with power asymmetry'. All four cultural-historical commentators demonstrate their versions of the problem. Allakhverdov and Ivanov (2008) challenge the science practice for being the arbitrator of diverse societal and cultural values; Bradley (2008, p. 41) raises the issue of how 'relatively powerful' academicians can deal with disempowered groups; Bang (2008) discusses the use of religious dress by minority groups in public institutions; and Toomela (2008), discusses his own study of how attitudes among military recruits towards narcotics and alcohol are affected by the professional and military authority. I would argue that this is a new development in a cultural-historical Vygotskian academia. This problem of cultural contact with power asymmetry is new—Vygotsky was not preoccupied about it. In this sense, these cultural-historical scholars are *neo*-Vygotskian as well (this claim about themselves is well accepted by sociocultural scholars). This problem is central for a sociocultural approach, and I am very interested in how my cultural-historical colleagues approach

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it. I hope that our dialogue between cultural-historical and socio-cultural Vygotskian academia will broaden and deepen.

Notes

I want to thank Kathy von Duyke and Hanne Riese for discussing earlier versions of this article.

1. I also want to take responsibility for using hidden multivoiced irony in my original article that probably at times is difficult to access due to the cultural differences of the international audience. For example, Benjamin Bradley wrote in his criticism,

    > We are told that socioculturalism 'is on the "winning side"' ([Matusov, 2008] p. 27), in that it exceeds cultural-historical Vygotskianism in terms of 'institutional (universities, conferences), economic (access to grants), and media (journals) power' (p. 26). But these are neoliberal criteria of success, which might suggest socioculturalism has become more a vehicle for neoliberalism than its nemesis. (p. 41)

    Of course, Benjamin Bradley is right about the neoliberal nature of the idea of a 'marketplace of ideas,' in which the value of conceptual frameworks is judged by the institutional power behind them. I wrote about 'the winning side' of a sociocultural approach exactly to problematize this trend, which, among other negative things, contradicts the conceptual framework of a sociocultural approach, rather than to sound congratulatory. Looking back, I think I should have used a more explicit discussion of this alarming phenomenon rather than rely more on indirect rhetorical tools.

2. It is true that universalism is under suspicion in a sociocultural approach (like, for example, a very questionable 'universal'—'liking to be able to express oneself' described by Bang, 2008, p. 51), but it does not deny it automatically as a possibility (like, for example, 'to having decent relations with other fellow human beings' [Bank, 2008, p. 51], although it probably depends on who that 'other fellow human being' is for each given culture) (see Rogoff, 2003, for more discussion).

3. The old aspect seems the question of how to promote education and well-being for all.

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Biography

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