Revisiting Vygotsky for Social Change

Bringing Together Theory and Practice

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Printed in the United States of America

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Looking at Identity from Cultural-historical Activity Theory (CHAT): Challenges and Suggestions

The purpose of this section is an analysis of the approach to study of identity emerging within the framework of cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT). For this, I selected five key papers, which challenge traditional views on identity and develop new approaches based on CHAT framework. I am aware that these papers do not reflect the whole complexity and variety of approaches existing within CHAT, however they somehow illustrate and summarise key trends and directions of theorisation and empirical studies of the problem of identity within CHAT framework. My task therefore is not to present detailed analysis of these papers, but rather to identify the main trends and theoretical perspectives of reconceptualising identity that CHAT provides.

The first paper is by Penuel and Wertsch (1995). Despite the fact that the paper does not refer to CHAT directly, it is probably the first attempt to link the problem of identity to the theoretical stance of CHAT. The paper presents an integrative sociocultural approach to identity formation; an approach that utilizes different elements of both Vygotsky's and Erikson's work (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p.84). Suggested approach to identity formation considers sociocultural processes and individual functioning as interacting moments in human action, rather than as static processes that exist in isolation from one another. "Human action, whether by individuals, groups, or institutions, provides the unit of analysis for a consideration of how individual intentions are, moreover, realized by different cultural tools or mediational means used for

carrying out action, tools that in turn shape individual functioning" (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 84). The authors suggest that identity formation must be viewed as being shaped by and shaping the forms of action, that involves a complex interplay among cultural tools employed in the action, the socio-cultural and institutional context of the action, and the purposes embedded in the action.

> Taking human action as the focus of analysis, we are able to provide a more coherent account of identity, not as a static, inflexible structure of the self, but as a dynamic dimension or moment in action, that may in fundamental ways change from activity to activity, depending on the way, in each activity, the purpose, form, cultural tools, and contexts are coordinated. (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 84)

The authors claim that mediated action, rather than an inner sense of identity, provides a basic unit of analysis, as it allows a different set of questions about the way individuals use cultural tools to form an identity. "In this approach, what we are attempting to interpret, explain, or analyze is meaningful human action, rather than either inner states of individuals or socio-cultural processes considered in isolation" (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 91).

The second paper is by Wertsch (1997). The author looks on identity through history:

> Knowledge about the past is widely viewed as a crucial ingredient in the construction of identity. From this perspective, we can't know who we are if we don't know where we have been, or, in the words of the historian David Lowenthal (1985): 'the sureness of "I was" is a necessary component of the sureness of "I am." (Wertsch, 1997, p. 5)

Further, Wertsch develops this view in the following way:

> Claims about how history shapes national identity and political action are inherently grounded in a set of assumptions about psychological processes. However, the discipline of psychology has had relatively little to say about just what these processes are. Indeed, commentators such as Marty (1994) have claimed that psychologists are often distinctly unhelpful in dealing with such topics due to various forms of psychological reductionism that underlie their research… The implication of Marty's comments is that in order to contribute to our understanding of issues such as national identity, psychology will have to do so as part of an interdisciplinary effort. (Wertsch, 1997, p. 6)

As a possible contribution to this interdisciplinary effort, the article examines the assumption of history as being an essential ingredient in the formation of identity from the perspective of how narratives about the past serve as a kind of 'cultural tool' in 'mediated action' that creates and re-creates identity. The paper argues that both the production and consumption of these cultural tools must be taken into account in order to develop an adequate analysis of history and identity (Wertsch, 1997, p. 5).

The importance of Wertsch's paper in relation to identity and CHAT is obvious as it introduces three important aspects of theorisation of identity; history, narratives as cultural tools, and mediated action.

The third paper I want to refer to is that of Roth (2007). This author suggests another angle of approach to identity within CHAT theoretical framework. He begins with the statement that identity itself is a difficult concept, suggesting that we are only at the beginning of understanding how to theorize it (p. 83).

> In everyday usage, as my driver's license and passport serving as "pieces of ID" show, the question of identity is reduced to the question of when (and where) someone is born, a name, and a photograph (perhaps augmented by a description of hair and eye color)…There is therefore a developmental process required that allows children, who equate identity with their names, to become adults, who equate identity with their relations and actions captured in autobiographies. (Roth, 2007, pp. 83–84)

From his point of view, cultural-historical activity theory constitutes one of a range of approaches that build on a dialectic relation between agency and structure, which means that the two parts mutually presuppose and constitute—and therefore cannot be reduced to each other. Most researchers drawing on CHAT focus on its structural aspects; "but precisely these do not allow us to theorize identity" (Roth, 2007, p. 88).

The purpose of this paper was to contribute to the development and expansion of CHAT so that it includes the tools for theorizing often neglected aspects of human praxis: identity and the moral nature of agency (Roth, 2007, p. 84). Discussing how the ethico-moral nature of agency mediates identity, Roth offers an expansion of CHAT as a way to theorise an identity, not only in terms of a consistent notion of identity but also in terms of a linkage of identity to ethics and morality:

> Because these are tied to concrete practical activity, the corresponding notions do not need to be imported into the theory from the outside: they

are an integral aspect of theory and praxis. In this approach, therefore, ethical aims cannot be considered independent of the ongoing activity but are tied both to the object/motives, the (by)products, and the concrete (moral) norms concretely enacted in the process. The ethico-moral dimensions and identity thereby come to be articulated through concrete participation in ongoing collective activity. (Roth, 2007, p. 92)

The fourth paper referenced is that of Daniels (Daniels, 2007). Referring to Holland et al. who studied the development of identities and agency specific to historically situated, socially enacted, culturally constructed worlds (Holland et al, 1998), he finds the link of this study to Bakhtin and Vygotsky "to develop a theory of identity as constantly forming and person as a composite of many often contradictory, self understandings and identities which are distributed across the material and social environment and rarely durable" (Daniels, 2007, p. 96). What Daniels supports in Holland's approach is developmental perspective. As Holland et al. put it: "The identities we gain within figured worlds are thus specifically historical developments, grown through continued participation in the positions defined by the social organisation of those world's activity" (Holland et al., 1998, p. 41). The approach Daniels refers to is that of Bernstein (1990, p. 13), who used the concept of social positioning to refer to the establishment of a specific relation to other subjects and to the creation of specific relationships within subjects:

He relates social positioning to the formation mental dispositions in terms of the identity's relation to the distribution of labour in society. It is through the deployment of his concepts of voice and message that Bernstein forges the link between division of labour, social position and discourse and opens up the possibilities for a language of description that will serve empirical as well analytical purposes. The distinction between what can be recognised as belonging to a voice and a particular message is formulated in terms of distinction between relations of power and relations of control… Thus, social categories constitute voices and control over practices constitutes message. Identity becomes the outcome of the voice—message relation. (Daniels, 2007, pp. 97–98)

Bernstein's theoretical stance creates some challenges to CHAT. First, "the theoretical move which Bernstein makes in relating positioning to the distribution of power and principles of control opens up the possibility of grounding the analysis of social positioning and mental dispositions in relation to the distribution of labour in an activity. Through the notions of 'voice'

and 'message' he brings the division of labour and principles of control (rules) into relation with social position in practice" (Daniels, 2007, p. 98).

Second, it

> …suggests that Activity Theory should…develop a language of description which allows for the parameters of power and control to be considered at structural and interactional levels of analysis. A systematic approach to the analysis and description of the formation of categories through the maintenance and shifting of boundaries and principles of control as exercised within categories would bring a powerful tool to the undoubted strengths of Activity Theory. This would then allow the analysis to move from one level to another in the same terms rather than treat division of labour and discourse as analytically independent items. (Daniels, 2007, p. 98)

The fifth and last paper is that of Dang (2013). This is an example of an empirical study of professional identity within CHAT theoretical framework. Findings from this study suggest that an individual teacher's identity influences her/his cognitive and affective perception of an event. Paired-placement created an environment whereby the student teachers' (ST's) conflicting identities, associated with different cognitive and affective perceptions of the experience, were challenged, leading to contradictions (Dang, 2013, p. 58).The contradictions in turn enabled the student teachers to work to resolve the contradictions. Through planned and supervised collaboration the STs resolved most of the conflicts, leading to qualitative change in their teaching professional identities, though in each individual case it was rather different. "From an activity theoretical perspective, shared community, past experiences, division of labour, and potentially shared objects were all part of this process" (Dang, 2013, p. 58).

These five papers suggest improvements of CHAT theoretical tools to address the problem of identity as a socio-cultural phenomenon by developing new ways of description or incorporating new conceptual tools (narratives, power and control, or moral agency). On the other hand, there is something in common which can be presented as a series of key statements leading to key words:

- identity is addressed as a phenomenon which exists within the *"social-individual"* space where the individual (personal) and society… are not in opposition but rather, the "individual is a higher form of sociality" (Roth, p. 84) and "sociocultural processes and

individual functioning are viewed "as interacting moments" (Penuel & Wertsch, p. 84).

- identity is approached from historical (developmental) perspective; "The identities we gain within figured worlds are thus specifically historical developments" (Daniels, 1997, p. 96).

- cultural mediation (narratives, mediated actions) is important to study identity as sociocultural phenomenon (Wertsch, p. 5).

- Mediated action, rather than an inner sense of identity, provides a basic unit of analysis as it allows the asking of a different set of questions about the way individuals use cultural tools to form an identity (Penuel & Wertsch, p. 91).

The list of key-words might be: *social and individual, mediation, development.*

Looking at Identity Through the Dialectics of Belonging, Being and Becoming: Cultural-historical Perspective

This section presents key dimensions of the study of identity within the framework of cultural-historical theory. It shows possible directions of studying identity as a cultural and social phenomenon through the dialectics of belonging, being and becoming. Cultural-historical theory is the theory of psychological development; it looks at processes rather than objects and results of development, and this opens some new perspectives on the study of identity as it allows an approach to identity not only as a psychological phenomenon (subjective sense of belonging) but within a process of being and becoming.

Contradictions and Drama: Dialectics of the Process

CHAT, which looks at identity as a result of a complex process of development (sense of belonging), provides strong analytical tools to study identity within "social-individual" space, where individual and social are viewed as interacting moments. I would agree that "identity is addressed as a phenomenon which exists within the "social-individual" space where "the individual (personal) and society… are not in opposition but rather, the "individual is a higher form of sociality" (Roth, 2007, p. 84).

However, in the triangle of activity which is the main theoretical model of CHAT (Figure 8.1) there is no such component as "an individual"; it contains a subject as opposed to an object, which is connected to subject through actions mediated by cultural artefacts.
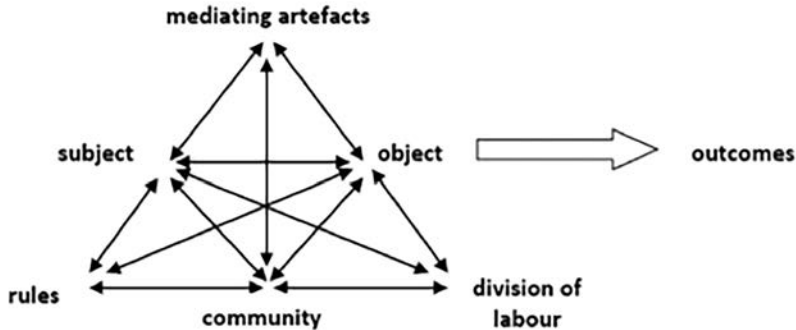
**Figure 8.1. Triangle of activity as a basic model of CHAT
(Engeström, 1987, 1999)**

On the other hand, in the triangle of activity, the subject is connected to community through rules; so "subject-object-mediating artefacts-rules-community" is a theoretical framework to analyse the relations of the individual and the social.

Another strong point in CHAT is an opportunity to study identity through contradictions of key components of the triangle of activity, which leads to the transformation of the whole activity system.

Cultural-historical theory provides a different perspective as it allows investigation of identity as a process *of obtaining* of a sense of belonging within changing socio-cultural contexts and environments; it allows change to the focus of studying interactions between the social and individual to study of how the social becomes the individual.

This theoretical principle comes from the general law of cultural development:

> …every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between the people as an intermental[1] category, then within the child as an intramental category…Genetically, social relations, real relations of people, stand behind all the higher mental functions and their relations. (Vygotsky 1997, p. 106)

Three points are important here: First, psychological functions do not appear IN social relations, but AS social relations; "every higher mental function was external because it was social before it became an internal strictly mental function; it was formerly a social relation" (Vygotsky 1997, p. 105). Second, even in being transformed from inter-psychological to intra-psychological "they remain quasi social" (Vygotsky 1997, p. 106). So, "intra-psychological" is social by its origin and construction. However, there is one more aspect in the relations of "inter-psychological" and "intra-psychological" which highlights a complex and dialectical character in the process of development. "The basic principle of the functioning of higher functions (personality) is social, entailing *interaction* of functions, in place of interaction between people. They can be most fully developed in the form of *drama*" (Vygotsky 1929/1989, p. 59). The social, inter-psychological form of higher mental functions is a *dramatic* interaction between people (Vygotsky 1929/1989, p. 69).

The dramatic frame of the personality as the unique organization and hierarchy of mental functions is the result of unique dramatic inter-psychological collisions that have happened in the life of the human being and their overcoming by a human being, the intra-psychological result of the individual's unique developmental trajectory. Therefore, the psychology "must be developed in the concepts of drama, not in the concepts of processes" (Vygotsky, 1929/1989 p. 71). Overcoming social dramatical collisions (dramas of life) the human being creates his/her unique personality.

The drama of the personality as a participant in the drama of life is the essential contradiction and the moving force for development. Thus, the intra-psychological consists of internalized dramatic social interactions: "the dynamic of the personality is drama" (Vygotsky, 1929/1989 p. 67). Here an abstract dialectical idea of a contradiction as a moving force of development obtains its concrete *psychological content* in the concept of the drama of life as a moving force in the development of human personality. This introduces a theoretical perspective of rethinking human psychology in terms of drama.

CHAT approaches identity as a socially and culturally constructed sense of belonging within the "social-individual" space by analysis of interactions and contradictions of "subject-object-mediating artefacts-rules-community" components of activity system. The cultural-historical approach opens a different perspective as it allows study of *the process* of creation and cultural construction of identity, identity in motion and identity in its becoming. This approach refocuses the research lens from looking at results of development to the process of socio-cultural genesis of identity. Dramatic collisions, social

dramas and conflicts as forms of social change are key components of this process. They are the turning points of the development of identity; in other words, identity as an individual sense of belonging is always a result of a series of individual (inter-psychological) collisions and dramas. The cultural-historical approach to studying identity allows investigation of the role of individual dramatic collisions as important foundational components that reflect the dialectics of this process of development. This theoretical framework leads empirical studies to identify and analyse social changes, specifically different dramatic collisions, socio-cultural situations and conflicts of personality, which challenge the individual's identity and bring changes to the sense of belonging.

Transformation and Reorganisation

In CHAT's theoretical perspective, the contradictions of key elements of activity systems lead to the transformation of the system (Engestrom, 1999). This is a valuable approach to study identity, as transformations are important outcomes and reflect the changes within the activity system as well as within the individual.

The cultural-historical approach looks at transformations from a different angle. Development is always a very complex and contradictory process, but, first of all, it is a dialectical process of qualitative change. The process of mental development,

> …is not confined to the scheme "more-less," but is characterized primarily and specifically by the presence of qualitative neoformations that are subject to their own rhythm and require a special measure each time. It is not correct to assume that all development is exhausted by the growth of these basic, elementary functions which are the prerequisites for higher aspects of the personality. (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 190)

"Neoformation" is a result of reorganisation of the whole system of functions, a new type of construction of consciousness and mental functions. This new type of construction is the result of metamorphosis (qualitative reorganisation of the whole system). Actually,

> Higher mental functions are not built up as a second story over elementary processes, but are new psychological systems that include a complex merging of elementary functions that will be included in the new system, and themselves begin to act according to new laws; each higher mental function is, thus, a unit of a higher order determined basically by a unique combination

of a series of more elementary functions in the new whole. (Vygotsky, 1999, p. 43)

Thus, not a new function or even a new higher mental function, but a qualitatively new structure of functions, characterizes the result of development.

This dialectical understanding orients research to focus on transformations as an important aspect of the process of development. However, not every transformation is of a dialectical nature and not every transformation is a qualitative change of the whole system. There are transformations which happen within the system as reconfiguration of existing components, parts and elements. Following Hegel's dialectical approach, we could call them "mechanical transformations". The human mind is not a mechanical system by its nature and developmental transformation is not a recombination of existing components. Developmental transformation is a qualitative change of the whole system where a new organ brings re-organisation to the whole system in such a way that the new (re-organised) system becomes a unit of a higher order and begins to act according to new laws. Distinguishing two types of transformations allows study of the process of social formation of human mind in two interrelated aspects: (1) as a quantitative change and (2) as a qualitative re-organisation.

CHAT looks at identity as an outcome of the transformation of activity systems. Cultural-historical theory allows looking at identity as specific psychological neoformation which is the result of qualitative reorganization of the whole system of the psychological functions of the personality. Changes in identity might have a huge impact on reorganization of all higher mental functions of an individual.

In summary: both theoretical approaches (CHAT and cultural-historical theory) share the common theoretical approach to human identity as a socio-cultural phenomenon emerging and developing within constantly changing social and cultural contexts and environments. On the other hand, there are significant differences: CHAT provides strong analytical tools to study identity in the process of interactions and contradictions of "subject-object-mediating artefacts-rules-community" components of an activity system. Cultural-historical theory provides theoretical tools to discover identity *as a process* of self-identification of the individual and looks at identity in its dialectical becoming. It opens a perspective for empirical studies of social collisions, social and cultural dramatic events as turning points bringing qualitative reorganisations to the whole structure and construction of human consciousness. In other words, the cultural-historical theoretical framework

opens a perspective enabling discovery of the sociocultural genesis of identity as a psychological process in its complexity and dialectics.

Mediation and Identity: Becoming and Being

I would agree that "cultural mediation (narratives, mediated actions) is important to study identity as sociocultural phenomenon" (Wertsch, 1997, p. 5). Refocusing analytical lens from inner sense of identity to mediated action which "provides a basic unit of analysis as it allows to ask a different set of questions about the way individuals use cultural tools to form an identity" (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995, p. 91), is an important step forward in developing the conceptual analytical tools of CHAT.

Cultural-historical theory conceptualises cultural mediation in a different way. First, it understands mediation as "unique activity consisting in creating artificial stimuli and in mastering his own processes" (Vygotsky 1997, p. 51). Vygotsky means a unique *mediating* activity (the creation and use of signs), not *mediated activity* as developed in CHAT. Second, looking from the developmental perspective, the point does not lie in creating and using signs as artificial stimuli, but in the "transition from direct, innate, natural forms and methods of behaviour to mediated, artificial mental functions" (Vygotsky 1998, p. 168). And third,

> …cultural signs and sign mediation are essential for the process of qualitative reorganisation of the psychological functions in a course of development: The sign as a tool reorganizes the whole structure of psychological functions. It forms a structural centre, which determines the composition of the functions and the relative importance of each separate process. The inclusion in any process of a sign remodels the whole structure of psychological operations. (Vygotsky 1929, p. 421)

Hence, two *dialectical moments* are of the most importance in this respect: (1) the dialectical transitions in the process of development and (2) the qualitative reorganization of the whole system of mental functions as a result of such transitions. This allows connecting of this understanding of mediation with concepts of drama and reorganization discussed in a previous section of this chapter.

However, there is one more point here. The creation and use of signs is an activity of an individual who creates artificial stimuli-devices for mastering his psychological processes (Vygotsky 1997, pp. 49–50). Analyzing Levy-Bruhl's story of a Kaffir, he highlights the main difference between two cases:

…in the first case, remembering was wholly determined by the principle of stimulus-response, then in the second case, the activity of the man hearing the speech and memorizing it by means of notches on wood is a unique activity consisting in creating artificial stimuli and in mastering his own processes by means of the notches; it is based on a completely different principle… Man himself determines his behavior with the help of artificially created stimuli-devices. (Vygotsky 1997, pp. 49–51)

This new principle does not comprise only the self-determination of the individual. In all Vygotsky's examples such as throwing dice, knot-tying operation, counting with fingers and others (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 50) a man is being involved in various *social situations and environments.* As Vygotsky himself puts it, "in all three cases that we considered, human behavior was determined not by the stimuli present, but by a new or changed psychological situation created by the man himself" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 54). A new psychological situation appears within the social context and life itself brings challenging tasks to the individual. The most important aspect is that an individual always acts within changing social contexts as an active participant using culturally and socially created signs. By doing this, an individual reorganizes the whole social situation and makes it different. Rethinking the individual means seeing the individual as actively involved in social interactions and actively reorganizing the situation by creating and using signs.

Both CHAT and cultural-historical theory emphasise the importance of cultural mediation in the process of formation of identity as a sociocultural phenomenon. However, they provide different perspectives in relation to what is the basic unit of analysis. For CHAT this unit is a mediated action; cultural-historical theory emphasises dialectical and dynamic aspects by introducing the mediating activities of an individual within changing social environments. In other words, cultural-historical theory is not focused on mediated actions, but *on a human being* who uses or creates cultural tools in order to reorganise the social situation and overcome existing challenges. Mediated actions are the results of development and they are important for maintaining or re-establishing an inner sense of identity. Mediating activities are activities of a human being who actively creates and recreates his/her sense of identity interacting with the sociocultural environment. In other words, CHAT provides strong theoretical tools to study various types of mediated actions and cultural mediators. The cultural-historical approach opens a perspective of researching the very process of how an individual uses or creates various cultural tools of mediation in situations of choice or challenge. On the other

hand, cultural-historical theory opens an opportunity to study identity as an internal cultural tool, which mediates human actions in situations of choice or challenge.

Summarising this section, two important points should be mentioned:

First, identity as a complex sociocultural phenomenon of the individual sense of belonging could be approached from two theoretical perspectives. Both CHAT and the cultural-historical theory look at identity as a phenomenon that emerges within sociocultural environments and settings. To study identity CHAT provides strong analytical theoretical tools: the concepts of contradiction and transformation. Cultural-historical theory provides the analytical tools to study the very process of formation of identity and it looks at identity in its becoming. It looks at identity as a dialectical process where contradictions exist not in a form of contradictions of components of an activity system, but as an inter-psychological dimension of socially created or existing dramatic collisions and therefore it is looking at how dramas in human life bring changes to the whole system of psychological functions of an individual and how these changes create and re-create the identity of an individual.

Second, both CHAT and cultural-historical theory emphasise the fundamental importance of cultural mediation in the process of human mental development. CHAT is focused mostly on mediated actions taking this as a basic analytical unit. Cultural-historical theory looks at mediation as a mediating (not mediated) activity of a human being and orients researchers to study the transitions from non-mediated to mediated actions as a qualitative change of the whole system of psychological functions of the individual. Second, it takes as a basic analytical unit *a human being* acting in various sociocultural contexts and environments and using various cultural tools in order to reorganise existing social situations of development. Cultural-historical theory suggests a shift from studying mediated actions to studying the human being who is actively involved in his/her constantly changing social environment by acting and interacting using various cultural signs as tools for creating and recreating his/her identity.

Perezhivanie: Dialectics of Being and Becoming

Perezhivanie is a concept in cultural-historical theory; I believe this concept might be productive for studying identity in the dialectics of being and becoming (Veresov, 2015).

> …perezhivanie is a concept which allows us to study the role and influence of environment on the psychological development of children in the analysis of the laws of development. (Vygotsky 1994, p. 343)

What is important is that perezhivanie is a tool (concept) for analyzing the influence of sociocultural environment, not on the individual per se, but *on the process of development* of the individual. In other words, the environment determines the development of the individual through the individual's perezhivanie of the environment (Vygotsky 1998, p. 294). This approach enlarges the developmental perspective as it introduces the principle of *refraction*. No particular aspects of the social environment in itself define the development, only aspects refracted through the child's perezhivanie (Vygotsky 1994, pp. 339–340). The perezhivanie of an individual is a kind of psychological prism, which determines the role and influence of the environment on development (Vygotsky 1994, p. 341). The developing individual is always a part of the social situation and the relation of the individual to the environment and the environment to the individual occurs through the perezhivanie of the individual (Vygotsky 1998, p. 294).

The principle of refraction is a principle which shows the dialectical relations of being and becoming *in the process of development*. The social becomes the individual, but the dialectics of this becoming are that only those components of the social environment refracted by the perezhivanie of the individual, achieve developmental significance (Vygotsky 1998, p. 294). The principle of refraction shows dialectical relations between significant components of the social environment and developmental outcomes (changes in the structure of higher mental functions). This principle shows how the same social environment affects unique developmental trajectories of different individuals. Vygotsky's famous example of three children from the same family shows that the same social environment, being differently refracted through perezhivanie of three different children, brought about three different developmental outcomes and individual developmental trajectories (Vygotsky 1994, pp. 339–340). In a certain sense, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the social environment as a source of development of the individual, exists only when the individual participates actively in this environment, by acting, interacting, interpreting, understanding, recreating and redesigning it. An individual's perezhivanie makes the social situation into the *social situation of development*.

CHAT does not apply perezhivanie as a concept; perezhivanie is not a component of the triangle of activity. To incorporate this concept to CHAT system of concepts remains a challenging task. Even more, Leont'ev's activity

theory, which is a fundamental theoretical root of CHAT, does not have this concept incorporated and related to other key theoretical concepts (activity, goals, operations etc.). The fundamental principle of refraction as it was developed in cultural-historical theory, remains mostly unknown in CHAT and this means that the dialectics of the social and individual and the dialectics of identity as belonging, being and becoming is outside the scope of CHAT.

Cultural-historical theory having perezhivanie as one of its key theoretical concepts, creates opportunities to study identity (as belonging) within social changes through the dialectics of being and becoming. It provides the theoretical tools for researching the following problems: (1) what are key components and aspects of social and cultural contexts and environments and their influence in the process of creating and recreating an identity? (2) how social changes may influence on the process of becoming of an identity? (3) how they are refracted through different perezhivanie of an individual and what are the outcomes of this refraction in terms of individual trajectories of developing identity? (4) what are key developmental characteristics of individual's perezhivanie of identity, especially in dramatic situations of social change when identity is challenged?

What Does This Mean for Empirical Research?

The purpose of this paper is not a comparative analysis of two theoretical perspectives—CHAT and cultural-historical theory as every theory has strengths and limits. This paper is not about to develop arguments in support of one theory and to diminish the other. Theoretical approaches not only provide a researcher with the concepts and principles as analytical tools for better understanding objects and processes under study; they orient empirical studies in designing concrete research projects and formulating research questions and methods.

CHAT as a strong and powerful theory orients empirical and experimental research on studying various types of social and cultural practices as socially driven activity systems. Contradictions of key components of activity systems (subject-object-mediating artefacts-rules-division of labour) bring new social practices which lead to transformation of the activity system. In relation to studies of identity CHAT orients concrete research to looking at identity within the context of social environments and interactions by exploring the mediated action as a fundamental unit of analysis.

Cultural-historical theory orients empirical research to focus on the origins and sociocultural process of genesis of identity as a dialectical process of belonging, being, and becoming. Contradiction is seen as a real dramatic event in the life of an individual, which challenges the sense of belonging; it orients empirical research to investigate identity within the process of how the social becomes the individual. Identification and analysis of such critical dramatic collisions as situations of social changes in real life of an individual might provide the researcher with very important data, which might show the role and place of identity within the system of higher mental functions of the individual and help to understand the process of reorganisation of higher mental functions. The human being who acts and interacts within different constantly changing sociocultural environments using various cultural tools and mediators to establish or re-establish his/her identity is the fundamental "unit of analysis" in cultural-historical theory. This orients empirical studies to look at how human beings act, what are the cultural tools and mediators they create and use to construct and reconstruct their sense of identity and how identity influences cultural tools the human being creates or uses.

Cultural-historical theory orients empirical research in studies of perezhivanie of individuals; analysis of various types of concrete perezhivanie related to/connected with identity as social demand or individual sense of belonging might help to improve better understanding of the role of identity in human life as a form of socio-cultural being and becoming a human.

Note

1. In Russian original it is interpsychological (интерпсихическая) and intrapsychological (интрапсихическая) (Vygotsky 1983, p. 145).

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