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Collective Memory: Issues from a Sociohistorical Perspective

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When we speak of collective memory, the term "collective" often indexes the notion that two or more people are involved. For psychologists, this typically means that the concern is with how groups function as integrated memory systems. Examining this type of social or collective activity (what I shall term here "interpsychological" functioning) has produced a variety of interesting insights such as those outlined in this issue of the *Newsletter*, and it has motivated much of my own writing (cf. Wertsch, 1985). However, I have recently become increasingly concerned with another sense in which mental functions such as memory can be collective or social. This sense of collectivity has to do with the fact that these mental functions are mediated by sociohistorically evolved (i.e., collective) tools or instruments.

As is the case with my research on interpsychological functioning, my concern here is rooted in the ideas developed by Vygotsky, Luria, Leont'ev, and other figures of what has been termed the sociohistorical perspective (cf. Smirnov, 1975) in the U.S.S.R. From this perspective, the two types of collectivity that I have outlined are by no means separate. This is reflected in Leont'ev's 1981 summary of Vygotsky's ideas on the relationship between mediational means or instruments that are collectively generated and maintained and the interpsychological plane of functioning.

Vygotsky identified two main, interconnected features (of activity) that are necessarily fundamental for psychology; its tool-like ["instrumental"] structure, and its inclusion in a system of interrelations with other people. It is these features that define the nature of human psychological processes. The tool mediates activity and thus connects humans not only with the world of objects but also with other people. Because of this, humans' activity *assimilates the experience of humankind*. This means that humans' mental processes [their 'higher psychological functions'] acquire a structure necessarily tied to the sociohistorically formed means and methods transmitted to them by others in the process of cooperative labor and social interaction. But it is impossible to transmit the means and methods needed to carry out a process in any way other than in external form--in the form of an action or external speech. In other words, higher psychological processes unique to humans can be acquired only through interaction with others, that is, through *interpsychological* processes that only later will begin to be carried out independently by the individual. (p. 56).

This review of Vygotsky's ideas is somewhat biased, reflecting Leont'ev's ideas about what a sociohistorical approach to mind should be. For example, instead of focusing on the concrete dynamics of interpsychological functioning as Vygotsky did (e.g., in the latter's account of the zone of proximal development), Leont'ev tended to view interpsychological functioning almost as an accidental fact about the way that it is possible to transmit "means and methods" needed to carry out a process. And when considering these means, especially language, he tended to overlook the ingenious semiotic analyses that were central to Vygotsky's approach. Instead, he approached these means primarily from the perspective of the more general problem of how it is possible to "assimilate the experience of humankind." This treatment of these issues reflects Leont'ev's general concern with formulating the foundations for a

theory of activity in Soviet psychology, a formulation that was grounded in Marx's ideas about subject-object interaction as laid out in the *Theses on Feuerbach*.

The debate over whether Leont'ev's work represents a legitimate extension or a misappropriation of Vygotsky's work has been going on for several years now (cf. Davydov & Radzikhovkii, 1985; Kozulin, 1984; Minick, 1986). It is my opinion that Leont'ev did not understand, or at least did not incorporate into his own approach, many of Vygotsky's most powerful insights about semiotic mediation and interpsychological functioning. However, as I have argued elsewhere (Wertsch, 1985, ch. 7), I also believe that Vygotsky's approach can be extended in important respects by incorporating some of Leont'ev's ideas into it. In particular, I think that Leont'ev's account of activity can provide a mechanism for extending Vygotsky's account of the social beyond the interpsychological plane. It seems that Vygotsky was beginning to recognize the need to do this late in his life (cf. Minick, in press), but he did not produce a complete account of how individual ("intrapsychological") and interpsychological planes of functioning are tied to social institutional processes. It is only by developing such an account that the Vygotskian approach can become a fullfledged analysis of mind in society instead of mind as it relates to microsociological, interpsychological functioning.

One way to deal with these issues in a concrete way is to focus on the mediational means involved. In his analysis of the tools that mediate human activity, Vygotsky touched on a variety of items, ranging from the relatively simple external artifacts (e.g., tying a knot in a handkerchief to remind oneself of something) to complex aesthetic patterns of inner speech. The tools that I want to consider here fall nearer the inner speech end of the continuum. These tools are in the form of complex verbal texts, in particular, sociohistorically evolved descriptions and explanations of events. For example, a police report of an event would be a text, as would an account provided by the news media.

An essential fact about such texts is that various genres have strict prescriptions for what counts as a good description or explanation.

Furthermore, genres typically differ in their prescriptions. Thus certain facts that must appear in police reports of a crime are typically left out of news accounts and vice versa. Many of these differences cannot be accounted for in terms of accuracy or truthfulness; instead, they are differences in what it is appropriate to represent and how it is appropriate to do so. For this reason, the selection of a particular text genre places a variety of constraints on what can be said and how it can be expressed.

The issue of how these and other mediational means are selected is something that Vygotsky did not deal with in any great detail. A first step in any attempt to do so would be to extend his tool analogy to a tool kit analogy. By talking about tool kits rather than tools, we are making an important statement about the relationship between psychological processes on the one hand and sociohistorical and cultural forces on the other. The modification in the metaphor means that instead of viewing mediational means as ironclad determiners of these processes, they are seen as providing a set of options that at least in principle allow some choice and some possibility of emancipation from established patterns. Schudson (1986) has dealt with these issues in connection with what he terms an "optimistic" view of culture in which individuals or groups are seen as having some degree of conscious choice in the mediational means they employ when approaching tasks. In contrast, a pessimistic view of culture sees culture as constraining us in fixed, deterministic ways, the consequences of which are that we are not aware of them and hence have little hope of bringing them under our control.

In accordance with the tool kit analogy an individual or group is viewed as approaching a task setting that requires a mental function (e.g., memory) in such a way that several different options are at least in principle available for dealing with it. The existence of a range of choices, however, does not mean the task is represented and solved. It is in connection with the evolution of these instruments as well as in connection with the forces that shape their use that we need to go beyond the individual or small group and examine sociohistorical and cultural forces.

The example I shall use to illustrate this point is usually considered to involve some type of reasoning or self-reflection rather than memory, but as I hope to demonstrate, in the end it can also tell us something important about collective memory, in at least one of its senses. My argument is generally concerned with a finding that has emerged repeatedly over the past few decades in psychology and other social sciences. This finding is that subjects in fact often have access to more than one tool or mediational means (e.g., strategy) for responding to a task, but they tend to have a very strong tendency to approach the task as if only one of the tools is relevant. Instead of focusing on whether or not subjects "have" capacities, concepts, or abilities of some sort, this finding has led researchers to focus on the notion that factors of context, habit, or some other type encourage subjects to privilege the use of one tool over others. Findings from research as diverse as that of Bellah, Madsen, Sullivan, Swidler, and Tipton (1985); Cole, Gay, Click, and Sharp (1971); Gilligan (1982); and Luria (1976) are consistent with this general observation. In all cases these results have led investigators to note that people privilege the use of one mediational means over others and ask how this process shapes the way these subjects can represent and solve a task.

The particular example of privileging mediational means that I shall examine here comes from the research of Bellah, et al. (1985). These authors have examined various ways in which contemporary Americans think and talk about individualism and commitment. A fundamental construct that they employ to make their case is that of "language." In this connection they state:

We do not use *language* in this book to mean primarily what the linguist studies. We use the term or refer to modes of moral discourse that include distinct vocabularies and characteristic patterns of moral reasoning. We use *first language* to refer to the individualistic mode that is the dominant American form of discourse about moral, social, and political matters. We use the term *second language* to refer to other forms, primarily biblical and republican, that provide at least part of the moral discourse of most Americans. (p. 334).

What Bellah, et al. call language is what I have above called text, and the various languages to which we have access may be thought of as tools in a kit of mediational means. Hence Americans generally have access to more than one language when they describe and explain their own and others patterns of thought and behavior.

Although Bellah, et al. do not go into detail in the mediational role of languages, they assume that when a speaker begins to speak in one language as opposed to another there are powerful constraints on what that speaker can think and say. This is reflected in statements such as, "Given this individualistic moral framework, the self becomes a crucial site for the comparative examination and probing of feelings that result from utilitarian acts and inspire expressive ones" (p. 78). Thus, implicit in their view is the claim that speakers shape the situation by choosing a language, but they are in turn shaped in what they can say by this choice. Of course this does not mean that a speaker is permanently frozen into a particular text or "mode of moral discourse"--after all, he or she has access to other languages and hence other patterns of thought and speech.

Without even touching on the vast majority of issues raised by Bellah, et al. I would like to outline a few general implications that their arguments have for collectively organized mediational means in general and for collective memory in particular. The first of these is that the languages they mention are part and parcel of a sociohistorical and cultural system; there is no sense in which they are appropriate, powerful, useful, and so forth in an absolute, universal, or ahistorical way. In different societies today and during different periods of American history the languages, or at least what serves as a first language, could be quite different. Hence, what is available in particular people's tool kits depends in a central way on their sociohistorical and cultural situation.

Furthermore, Bellah, et al. do not really address this issue, there are probably important differences in when and where members of a particular culture choose to use one as opposed to another of the languages to which they have access. That is, given that contemporary Americans have access to several different languages, how do they know which one to use on particular

occasions? To say that one of these languages serves as a first language implies that there is a predisposition within the individual in all situations to use one language over others. However, there are obviously powerful contextual constraints that these and other authors have not yet explored which influence the choice of language. Just as sociohistorical and cultural background shape the languages available to someone, they presumably influence the nature of the situations that call for their use.

With regard to memory, the languages that groups speak can be expected to have a profound impact on how they go about remembering something and hence what it is that they remember. Bellah, et al. deal with this issue in their account of "communities of memory." They point out that because a community of the sort that interests them is in an important sense constituted by the history it shares, it must constantly retell its story, "its constitutive narrative" (p. 153). but as should be clear by now, the way in which this story is told is shaped by the language the members of the community speak. Furthermore, this story will be shaped on particular occasions by speakers' selection from among the various languages available to them. For example, instead of recounting a community's history by using the language of individualism, a speaker may use a language of communal commitment to create a nostalgic version of better times. Again, choice of mediational means to a great extent shapes what can and cannot be thought and said, or in this case, remembered.

In the end, we need to combine the analysis of collectively organized mediational means with the analysis of interpsychological functioning. In this connection, several issues arise. For example, if choice of mediational means is a major determinant of how thinking and speaking can proceed, then processes whereby groups make decisions (either implicitly or explicitly) about these means should become a focus of our research. In many instances, the negotiation or imposition of this decision may have more to do with group performance than anything else.

Making statements and suggestions such as these means above all that the study of memory or any other mental function must begin to incorporate findings and methods from a variety of

approaches and disciplines. If we are to take the study of memory, thinking, attention, or any other aspect of human consciousness seriously, we must begin by recognizing the sociohistorical and cultural embeddedness of the subjects as well as investigators involved.

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