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Vygotsky's Sociohistorical Psychology and Its Contemporary Applications.
Carl Ratner. New York, 1991, 370 pages, \$45.00.

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It is a real joy to see a book published by a psychologist that doesn't accept the standard definition of psychology as the study of the behavior or the experience of the individual. It is almost the "official" definition of psychology that the isolated individual is the proper unit of analysis and object of study. Psychology has become, not a social science, but an a-social, if not anti-social science, in its ignoring and denial of the social context in the development and existence of everything we call human. This is a book for all of us who know that the self-contained, isolated individual does **not** exist in the real world.

This is also a book for those of us who still don't believe that what has been called "the cognitive revolution" was in fact a revolution in psychology. After strict behaviorism developed into a neo-behaviorism employing inferred inner processes, the next step was simply to call these in-the-head processes, "cognitive" processes. But this "revolution" has been cognition without culture or context. A real and much-needed revolution in psychology would be the conceptualization of humans as developing and existing within a sociohistorical context. This is what Lev Vygotsky did, and the application of Vygotsky's work to contemporary psychology is what Carl Ratner has done. Ratner's book is not designed to tell us what Vygotsky said, but to apply Vygotsky's approach to *all* of psychology—or as much as can be discussed in only 370 pages.

It is Ratner's claim (and I agree) that the Vygotskian (or sociohistorical or contextual) approach is an appropriate paradigm for contemporary psychology, and that it can provide the integrative framework and concepts that we desperately need. There has been much talk lately in psychology of paradigms and paradigm-shifts. A shift from a cognitive psychology that is "encapsulated in the head" to a genuinely contextual approach, in which all human psychological processes are regarded as deriving from the sociohistorical world in which they live, would be a real paradigm-shift, and a real revolution. Ratner takes a giant step in this direction by using sociohistorical psychology as an explanatory framework for a great number of psychological functions, and he marshals a wealth of contemporary evidence to support this paradigm.

The basic premise of the book is: *psychological phenomena are humanly constructed as individuals participate in social interactions and as they employ tools (technology).*

Employing this basic and powerful Vygotskian premise, Ratner has organized his book as follows.

Chapter 1. Psychology's general features, the mediated nature of human psychology and the interdependence of consciousness, sociality, and tool use.

Chapter 2. Psychology's concrete social character, as seen in color, auditory, olfactory, and spatial perception, size constancy, and other basic processes.

Chapter 3. Psychological universals, true and false. The relation between general and concrete psychological features, and false psychological universals.

Chapter 4. The development of psychology in the individual, the nonmechanical character of socialization, and the crucial distinction between capacity and performance.

Chapter 5. Psychology's functional autonomy from biology, with detailed discussions of the complex and non-determinative role of genes, hormones, and the brain.

Chapter 6. Madness. This is a very long chapter (60 pages), but necessarily so. It presents an analysis of madness (psychosis) as "a rupture of sociality." This includes an analysis of the causes, symptoms, and treatment of what we call madness, psychosis, psychopathology, etc.

Conclusion. A brief chapter discussing the inherent political nature of all psychological doctrines.

References. A 33 page list of references. A real gold-mine of sources for anyone interested in the sociohistorical paradigm for psychology.

The book is necessarily critical of several mainstream viewpoints. But, the most detailed critique in the book is about psychology's improper conceptualization of its relationship to biology, especially the many forms of biological determinism, and biological reductionism, as well as the quasi-biological nature of many concepts and terms used in mainstream psychology. An example of this is the sloppy way that we use quasi- and pseudo-biological terms in discussing the concept of intelligence. In contrast, Ratner proposes that psychology is functionally autonomous from biology, and that biology provides a general, potentiating substratum or basis for psychological phenomena, rather than biology determining our psychological processes and experience. He develops this central point in fine detail.

My strong impression is that this is an excellent and much-needed book. However, I have some minor arguments with the book, and, every reviewer is allowed to indulge some of his or her concerns and preferences. I have three of these.

My first concern is the term "mediation." In the Vygotskian approach, there is frequent reference to the mediating processes (consciousness, intentions, etc.) that occur between stimulus and response. But there are (at least) two very different interpretations of what "mediation" involves. One is mediation as a form of connection as found in neo-behaviorism, the inferred inner processes between stimulus and response. This conception of mediation keeps the analysis at the S-R level. A very different concept of mediation is the Vygotskian one, where the mediation processes of consciousness and intentionality, and the dialectical interrelations of biological, social, and psychological phenomena create emergent properties not found at the S-R level. The Vygotskian concept of mediation, which Ratner employs, refers to an emergentism not found in neo-behaviorism.

My second concern is with Ratner's use of the term "natural" to refer to biological processes, which leaves social and cultural things as "unnatural." There is certainly a distinction to be made between social things and biological things. But, if we are truly dialectical, these two kinds of processes, in humans, are deeply interrelated, so cultural and social things are not "unnatural." Who has the appropriate terms here? I don't.

My third, and last concern, is with Ratner's assertion that biology provides merely "a general, potentiating substratum for psychological phenomena." I think that his assertion is entirely appropriate. That is, Ratner's clear and strong assertion is necessary, in light of the great number of biological deterministic, and pseudo- and quasi-biological concepts that pollute much of psychology. However, if we truly believe in sophisticated dialectical concepts of "differentiated unities" and "difference-in-relationship," then biological and social processes are deeply interrelated, and biology is more than a potentiating substratum. In the long run, we need some new terms and concepts here, which do not pull us down again into the swamp of biological determinism and biological reductionism.

I hope that the appearance of Ratner's book signals the beginning of a new paradigm in psychology, the sociohistorical or contextual approach, that would be a real revolution in psychology, and that would destroy the conceptual isolation of psychology from the other social and human sciences.