

Dialectical and Dialogic Processes in Psychological Development: Toward an Understanding of Student Experiences*

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Abstract. *In an effort to make the process of psychological development the topic of research, the dialectic as introduced by Lev Vygotsky is compared to the dialogic concept as first introduced by Bakhtin. The conflict between authors who find the dialectical and dialogic perspectives complementary are considered alongside authors who find them contradictory; and Werner's orthogenetic principle compels an examination of developmental processes that facilitates a comparison. An examination of the ways Vygotsky and Bakhtin elaborated their views in terms of concept development and mediation versus the mastery of genres and development of will in the form of voice tests their compatibility and the implications for revealing developmental processes. The analysis suggests that the theories may lead researchers to focus on different phenomena, but that they create the possibility of a more complete analysis when focused on processes. They hint at two developmental processes that are akin to Engeström's horizontal and vertical development.*

Keywords: dialectics, dialogue, dialogic, Vygotsky, Bakhtin

A Marxist psychology, however conceived, must in some way attempt to explain how systematic change occurs within the lives of socially and materially embedded individuals. Whether the goal is revolution or a more academic understanding of psychological development, knowing how people change is essential, because individual development creates and is created by a changing society. Nevertheless, mainstream psychology has tended to neglect the underlying processes of change. The conception of humans as information processors has led to a focus on discrete bits in the form of variables. As Engeström suggests, "Causation is understood as a systematic relationship between variables rather than a causal process. In contrast to variable-based research, process oriented research believes that causation can actually be observed and reconstructed as a real sequence of events" (2006, p. 2). Thus learning about developmental processes is only possible through the creation of circumstances that promote

change, allowing researchers to observe the intricate relations and events that shape the emergence of what we might consider higher psychological functioning. Variables, on the other hand, are inherently static, and their use has led to endless lists of variables as explanation, neglecting processes, because the study of actions and activities does not fit with dominant models or with the needs of leaders who are committed to the status quo. The focus on *processes* can reveal structural impediments and new routes to influencing development, clarifying the interdependence of personal and societal revolutions.

Marx, however, did not focus on individuals. Stetsenko claims that Lev Vygotsky made "the first attempt in psychology and education to apply the principles of Marxist dialectics in developing theory of human development and learning" (2010, p. 70). Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT) is a

perspective based on the work of Vygotsky and the contributions of his followers (Cole, 1996; Engeström, 2009), and dialectical processes are foundational to its explanations of human development (Roth & Lee, 2007). Dialectics are not understood consistently, but in an effort to develop analytical tools, central tenets include: the use of opposites, endless movement, and different levels. Dialectics conceives of “mutually exclusive category pairs including individual-collective, body-mind, subject-object, agency-structure, and material-ideal; that is, the opposites are theorized as non-identical expressions of the same category, which thereby embodies an inner contradiction” (Roth & Lee, p. 195). Development can therefore be viewed as the resolution of contradiction such that the interdependence becomes a resource (Packer, 2008; Beaty, 2013). Stetsenko similarly discusses a “unity in difference” but emphasizes movement as an essential part: It is the “basic underlying processes of ceaseless flux of motion” that keep these pairs from becoming static (2010, p. 76). Furthermore, Roth and Lee use “an analogy of threads, strands, and fibers” to conceive of different levels that repeat the contradictions (p. 195). Dialectics, therefore, is necessarily about contradictions that move us forward and the different levels that reflect and depend on one another.

Wertsch (1991) pointed out, however, that Vygotsky “did not succeed in providing a genuinely sociocultural approach to mind” (p. 46); Wertsch therefore turned to the work of Mikhail Bakhtin to connect individuals more securely to the social world. This merging of theories connects Vygotsky’s (2004) ideas about concept development at the intrapsychological level to the ways in which meaning is contextualized within the action of an utterance and the activity of dialogue (Wertsch, 1991, p. 50). An utterance brings to life the intentions of a speaker through the creation of a “voice” that is always in concert with other voices while also being constrained by a particular “speech genre” (Bakhtin, 1986). Bakhtin argues that individual development is social and material: “The word is interindividual. Everything that is said, expressed, is located outside the ‘soul’ of the speaker and does not belong only to him [or her]. The word cannot be assigned to a single speaker” (1986, p. 121). Thus Bakhtin shifts the focus from an individual who uses mediating tools originating in social activity to processes of collaborative dialogue, targeting utterances rather than the word. To some degree Vygotsky, with his focus on concepts, was focused on people working on the material world using social tools, while Bakhtin

focused on the social process of understanding the material world.

Wegerif (2008) argues, though, that the dialectics of Vygotsky and the dialogic processes of Bakhtin are incompatible. “Vygotsky’s account of development involved the dialectical overcoming of participatory thought. A dialogic perspective, on the other hand, assumes such ‘participation’ as the ineluctable context of thought” (Wegerif, 2008, p. 355). Consistent with Elhommoumi’s (2009) declaration that the “dialectic is the activity within which meanings compete for mastery and control” (p. 51), Wegerif contrasts dialogic thinking as that which involves multiple participating voices. The effort to *control* in dialectics is distinguished from “the basic idea that meaning always implies at least two voices,” which maintain their unique identities and are *not* unified (Wegerif, p. 348). Most importantly, Wegerif argues that a voice is not a tool, as Wertsch had suggested, “but an answer to the question ‘who is speaking?’” (p. 355).

The questionable compatibility of dialectics and dialogic processes is complicated by the phenomena to which they are applied. I initially viewed Bakhtin’s (1986) concepts of *voices* and *genres* as tools for revealing developmental processes rather than as a description of a process. Later I began to appreciate the significance of Bakhtin’s work for connecting different levels of development (which I further associate with Latour’s (1996) ideas about Actor-Network Theory). The way that *speech genres* originate in social interactions, in distant places and times, reveals how moments of conversation are filled with a history of other genres and *voices*. Both Vygotsky and Bakhtin describe a process of the social becoming personal, but research tends to focus on a single discussion and ways of relating that are part of developmental processes but not actually about *how* the change occurs. For instance, Ferholt and Lecusay (2010) distinguish types of dialogue within a classroom that create different relationships at different points in time, but the emergence of something akin to “higher psychological processes” is beyond their scope.

The first problem is about *how* to study “developmental processes.” As mentioned, Engeström (2006) has argued for *creating* development as a way of studying it. My project attempts this by involving students in collaborative research and studying their development. The second problem is about how to escape circular arguments in which development is defined in such a way that it is certain to appear. My solution is to use Werner’s (1957) *or-*

thogenetic principle as a standard for comparing theories. Werner argued that *differentiation* and *hierarchical integration* are the two defining aspects of development: “Rather than being able to start with language, cognition, logic, or whatever, Werner started with the notion of an organism, which would eventually develop [...] differentiated functions” (Glick, 1992, p. 560). The “what” of development is therefore not expected to exist at the outset. In this project, evidence of an emerging academic discourse is sought to reveal underlying processes.

Wegerif (2008), though, does not focus on *process* as he argues that a dialectical perspective is modernist while a dialogic perspective is postmodern. He presses for multiple truths because all voices are equal in exploratory talk, creating a “space of reflection.” This space is not development – though it may promote development better than other types of dialogue. Wegerif argues that the discussion does not serve as a *tool* in exploratory talk but that it creates space for reflection; and that reflection is an activity, not a process of change.

Engeström argues, “Development is a burdened, yet necessary concept” (2009, p. 312), and indeed, there can be reluctance to consider development. Few would argue that children are as equipped as adults in their psychological functioning, but the determination by researchers who are not supporting the status quo to value difference can interfere with bringing about change. Wegerif’s focus on exploration suggests that dialogic processes would add new voices and genres to one’s repertoire – a process of addition – as opposed to the dialectical focus on contradiction – an apparent subtractive. Both Wegerif and Elhommoumi (2009) discuss dialectics in terms overcoming differences, but Stetsenko (2010) describes *constant* motion and Roth and Lee (2007) discuss *unity in contraction*: The differences are not erased but become parts of a common idea. As new contradictions appear and old contradictions are re-experienced at a higher level, it can be argued that both offer additive processes.

Concepts and Utterances

An examination of how Bakhtin and Vygotsky described specific developmental changes reveals the nature and role of process more clearly than a decontextualized description; and they both focused on language. For Vygotsky (2004), the role of words is explicated in his model of concept development. The meaning of a word moves from associations to complexes and then to concepts – from meaningless

connections to vague ideas to abstractions that are connected to a history of the word and its relations to other concepts. The word makes full abstraction possible, opening the way to higher mental functioning and allowing consciousness and agency (Packer, 2008; Beaty, 2013). Werner’s concept of differentiation can be seen in the discovery of which word is used – differentiating the milk from the cup and the cat from the dog – and as the meaning emerges, a hierarchical relation connects concepts to other concepts. As they develop, they become more finely tuned tools for thinking.

By contrast, Bakhtin focused on the “utterance” and its relation to past and future utterances as well as *audiences*, *speech genres*, and *voices*. The past and future are equally a part of Vygotsky’s ideas about concepts, but audiences are irrelevant because Vygotsky was not describing concepts as parts of discussions; instead concepts were tools used in object-oriented activity. Speech genres, though frequently not made explicit, also require learning and development. An individual would need exposure to and possibly direct instruction in the use of a genre; schools frequently take on these tasks. Genres must be differentiated from one another – perhaps defining one another in how they are different – and a hierarchical structure links them together as different forms of letters, essays, and stories are introduced. In acknowledging that speech genres require mastery, Bakhtin (1986) argued that the speaker’s “speech will” can be expressed first in the selection of genre and then in the “nuances” expressed (p. 79). He continued,

The better our command of genre, the more freely we employ them, the more fully and clearly we reveal our own individuality in them (where this is possible and necessary), the more flexibly and precisely we reflect the unrepeatable situation of communication – in a word, the more perfectly we implement our free speech plan. (p. 80)

Genres create a structure from which individual freedoms emerge. A similar process exists as signs mediate the relationship between stimulus and response, giving people the freedom to change their responses from that which was conditioned (Vygotsky, 1994). Both Vygotsky and Bakhtin view *will* or *agency* as the result of using the structure of language to achieve individual purposes.

Wegerif (2008) described a “dialectical overcoming of participatory thought” (p. 355), but Bakhtin (1986) also recognized a process by which individuals transform past dialogues into single voices: “Others’ words become anonymous and are assimilated

lated (in reworded form, of course); consciousness is *monologized*... This monologized consciousness enters as one single whole into a new dialogue (with new external voices of others)" (p. 163). The language of others is unified to allow for new dialogues. This process sounds remarkably like "overcoming participatory thought," at least in the moment of a particular dialogue.

The idea of a dialogue such as exploratory talk is not so different from Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development (zoped). The "adult guidance" or "more expert peers" use dialogue and other actions to facilitate the completion of an activity that the child would otherwise not finish (p. 86), but the developmental process for the child is described as internalization. To accomplish this, the word, genre, or other action would require differentiation – to be made distinct from other actions in the activity – and to really be able to use the action, it would need to be understood hierarchically as a specific part of the activity. The differentiation of concepts and genres necessitates comparison and recognition of the conflicts that distinguish differences, suggesting the necessity of a dialectical process. The question of whether or not contradiction is part of the social relations that shape development is a separate one.

Zopeds and Dialogues

The ultimate purpose of this comparison is to develop an analysis of a series of discussions that will reveal developmental processes at both the group and individual level. Vygotsky and Bakhtin presented different points of focus: words as a way to consider the changing nature and use of concepts, and utterances to understand the mastery of academic discourse as a genre and the expression of a voice. The following excerpt will be approached differently depending on the perspective:

One of the important questions that we looked at in terms of the interview was high-school preparation. You know, you have some students who come in, and they're better prepared. They're better prepared for college. You'll have, you'll have, you know. It's not just that, but you know you have a student who, once you say, the fact that you gave them a handout means connect the dots. That handout has some significance. You know what I mean? Making those connections. And knowing and listening and paying attention. And you know, I've had professors say to me, Oh, you must have not been here for that class. You're absolutely right; I wasn't. So I fucked it up. What can I tell

you? Right? But it's not, you know, it's college preparation. And I think part of it is, you know, temperament. Or what you're used to. It's, you know, it's a combination of things. I think it's a very hard thing to look at and to definitively say you know it's one thing or another. It points to that though. It points to not being prepared. You know?

The focus on words suggests that "college preparation" is important. In this excerpt, the student offers examples: using a handout, making connections, knowing, listening, and paying attention. She demonstrates the idea of "ascending to the concrete" by applying the concept of college preparation to a specific action – using a handout provided by the professor. She attempts to use the word to explain the example she has given, but then she recognizes the role of "temperament" in the actions she has just discussed. She acknowledges that college preparation is not a sufficient explanation for the activity – she differentiates the idea from others – by offering a second word. The way to pursue whether or not she demonstrates change then is by looking for other uses of these words and ideas connected to these words in some form. Are they used as tools more frequently and do they offer a more differentiated and hierarchical relation to other ideas as time passes?

By contrast, focusing on this excerpt as an utterance means we examine how it is related to the utterances before and after in the immediate discussion as well as in earlier discussions. Many explanations were considered over the academic year for why few students graduate from community college, and it is interesting that in this moment she attempts to give the definitive explanation but cannot follow through. Multiple voices arise in this utterance as she undertakes a dialogue with herself – with the different voices that she has taken as her own. Yet the nature of scientific work demands a push for the "best" theory. This is the academic genre she attempts to use, but as the mentor of the group, I pushed for exploration and intended to put more effort into having them question their ideas than offer hypotheses (analysis will reveal how often this occurred). Perhaps this multi-voiced utterance demonstrates a conflict between two speech genres – a failed effort to differentiate – or perhaps she is employing an effort at one genre but experiences a conflict between the structure of the genre and her voice that she cannot yet resolve. An examination of how hypotheses, variables, and critique are discussed, how particular genres are used in earlier discussions, and how often utterances involve multiple voices will allow the emergence of a pattern that

may or may not show the mastery of genres and an emergence of voice. Does the structure of genres make the voice possible? Or is it a more social marker?

In this case, the speaker nearly always asserted her position when she spoke, but she did not express herself in a way that was “academic.” She has highly developed speech genres for other types of dialogues, but she resisted many aspects of academic discourse, most notably in the choice of vocabulary that was expected. Her resistance is a topic of its own to be more fully considered elsewhere, but the apparent need for her to take on new genres so that she could move from an accomplished counselor who lacked formal education and had been dependent on other people’s grants into someone who could apply for grants herself, demonstrates a social purpose.

As written above, Wegerif (2008) alluded to the idea of multiple truths that often comes into conflict with modernist views of science and the idea of psychological development. The mastery of new genres, however, can be considered developmental “progress” that is movement in different directions. Engeström (2006; 2009) has proposed this with the concept of “expansive development.” “Horizontal or sideways learning and development” recognizes how alternative ways of thinking can be incorporated into an individual’s activities (Engeström, 2006, p. 153). This is a process of taking on a new way of acting and thinking and is visible when considering the different approaches professionals of different disciplines take to a common problem. This developmental expansion is perhaps more consistent with the dialogic process. A new speech genre – in this case – is not about developing higher psychological functioning, but about mastering the new ways of expressing these capacities. It is an example of multilinearity in psychological development – horizontal movement onto new lines. The progress of mastering a particular genre, however, will still involve differentiation – making the way of speaking more clearly different from other ways of speaking. If this student is to become a psychologist and gain the respect of institutions that can offer grants, she will need to speak the language that is expected and understand the problems of the youth with whom she had previously worked in ways psychologists are expected to – or to speak well enough to demonstrate why they are insufficient – even though she had sufficient understandings to make a difference in their lives without a formal education.

Conclusions

Dialectical and dialogic processes are not categorically different when we examine how concepts, genres, and voices develop. The terms, however, are oriented to different levels: an intrapsychological process that is dialectical and an interpsychological process that is dialogic. At the interpsychological level, there can be an effort to collaboratively find the Truth or there can be an effort to expand each voice in the collective and try different perspectives without an effort to resolve the tensions. At the intrapsychological level, vertical development – that which is traditionally discussed when considering the differences between children and adults – seems to draw out a similarity between dialectical and dialogic progression whereas horizontal development is akin to acquiring new genres that remain independent of other lines of development or that share important concepts but involve switching the focus or terminology.

The problem of transference may necessitate yet another developmental process as concepts are integrated across borders without losing the structure of genres. People have been known to maintain contradictory positions without ever recognizing the contradiction, but this suggests a lack of differentiation. Interestingly, Bakhtin (1986) made his own comparison:

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. (p. 147)

Based on Bakhtin’s own approach to analysis, it is difficult to know the full meaning of this utterance, because it was taken from his “notes,” removed from a larger dialogue. Yet, even though Bakhtin seems taking a negative view of dialectics here, the distinction he made may hold to some extent without the negativity.

Dialogue is fundamentally about the conversations people have; dialogue is about relationships. Dialectics, on the other hand, is about a process of developing the capacity for abstractions and the continued development of consciousness, giving individuals the ability to regulate their actions and make choices rather than just respond to stimuli. There is a distancing in this process (which can exist at a collective level) that allows us to think abstractly and look “objectively” at ourselves. Reflection in

this sense is not a dialogic process, which is necessarily about maintaining concrete voices. This abstraction and materiality, however, work together in a dialectical unity of opposites.

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