



Abstract The interactivist proposal presented by Christopher and Bickhard addresses fundamental issues of great importance for a metatheory of cultural psychology, especially one that is concerned with the detailed articulation of the origins of consciousness via practice and participation. Such issues include the much debated concepts of internalization, agency, levels of knowing and representation. While being an elegant account that offers interesting insights, its use of other approaches and theorists—be they classic or current—is irritating. This is particularly discussed in the cases of Karl Marx and, in greater detail, of Lev Vygotsky and his sociohistorical psychology. It is argued that dealing with these and other authors in more depth would be necessary, fruitful and sooner or later even indispensable, not only in order to avoid misinterpretations or to enrich the interactivist account, but also to answer the pre-eminent question as to the surplus of this proposal in comparison to others.

Key Words comparison of theories, consciousness, Marx, sociohistorical psychology, Vygotsky

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Consciousness via Practice and Participation: Interactivism vis-à-vis Other Theoretical Accounts

Great Expectations

Christopher and Bickhard (2007) present a theoretical account which aims at contributing to a metatheory of cultural psychology from the perspective of interactivism, which itself is worked out as a process ontology. Two premises are especially important for them: the avoidance of any reification of culture and the intertwining of agency and culture. Successively the role of implicitness, a functional view of representation, the significance of constructivism with respect to the persistence and stability of personality, the presence of different levels of knowing, and the relationship between interactivism and culture are

discussed. Finally the proposal is applied to cross-cultural studies on 'collectivism' and 'individualism' to show how contradicting empirical results could be reinterpreted in a sensible manner.

This rough recapitulation already demonstrates that such an endeavour has a wide scope, is highly ambitious and evokes great expectations. It does so inevitably since anyone addressing such a wide range of metatheoretical questions for cultural psychology is *nolens volens* confronted with big and unwieldy terminological and conceptual issues. Additionally to those already pointed out above, the following issues can be named: the concept of culture itself; the relationship between culture and society; the role of hermeneutics in cultural psychology; and action, behaviour and forms of scientific explanation in cultural psychology. Moreover, anyone addressing such a wide range of metatheoretical questions for cultural psychology is confronted with the fact that he or she is surrounded by a tremendous amount of parallel theoretical work—present and past. This, I think, is something worthwhile to reflect upon in greater detail than the authors do. I regard this topic as crucial and will therefore come back to it after pointing out some arguments and aspects of the proposal which are particularly convincing and heuristically fruitful.¹

Strengths of the Proposal

Many of the authors' arguments are certainly familiar to a readership acquainted with cultural psychology. Primarily, something you might term 'creative theoretical syntheses' is presented. This, however, is done in an insightful and elegant manner. The reflections on implicitness, representation, variation and selection, and levels of knowing constitute important building bricks of a metatheory for cultural psychology. The general thrust of the interactivist model against reifications of culture and self and an 'over-cognizing' subject certainly deserves attention. It may even be said that Christopher and Bickhard reverse some assumptions that are (tacitly) central for some prominent psychological approaches: in fact propositional knowledge or mental images and memories of such images should not be taken as the starting points of development but be acknowledged as rather late products of this process.

The particular strength of the interactivist model becomes evident when the authors apply it to the discussion of 'individualism' versus 'collectivism' (see p. 280). By referring to different levels of knowing outlined previously in their article they are able to add interesting arguments to the debate as to whether Japanese are more collectivistic

than Americans; a debate heated by contradicting empirical results, common views and their respective interpretations. Indeed Christopher and Bickhard reject the simple opposition of 'collectivism: yes or no', and argue on a much more complex level. They point out the fact that the adherents of the view that Japanese are just as individualistic as Americans base their arguments on empirical data gathered via self-reports. Such measures, however, only address a rather high level of knowing (explicit knowing) and are thus methodologically limited. On the other hand studies focusing on more basic levels of knowing could possibly show that implicit, day-to-day social practices remain oriented towards collectivism. But how, then, can the results of the self-reports measures be interpreted? Here the authors argue that due to Western influence societal changes have taken place which have led to a stronger incorporation of individualistic values. But according to Christopher and Bickhard, one also has to be cautious of simple interpretations of such questionnaire data:

To fully understand the meaning of responses to a self-report questionnaire, individual items must be interpreted within a cultural context of meaning. Accurate linguistic translations are no guarantee that items will retain a common meaning as implicit presuppositions provide the context for understanding and responding to psychological measures. (p. 284)

Not everything, however, is equally fruitful and convincing.

Other Approaches, Other Theorists

Christopher and Bickhard argue that their theoretical proposal is generally compatible with social practice, hermeneutic, dialogical and narrative insights. Moreover, they quote or paraphrase a large number of classic philosophical and psychological theorists, among them Descartes, Marx, Vygotsky, Luria, Kohlberg, Piaget, Inhelder, Erikson, Gibson, Peirce, Dewey, Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger, and Gadamer. Obviously this is—as are the approaches they claim to be compatible with their model—a rather heterogeneous mixture. The authors seem to be aware of this and state quite near the beginning of their article:

The intent of this article will not be a historical review of the origins of interactivism but instead a presentation of some of those features of interactivism that are most relevant to forming a cohesive metatheory for cultural psychology. While there are very strong connections with other theories and orientations in philosophy, psychology and cultural psychology, the limitations of space preclude our being able to do more than occasionally hint at points of convergence and departure. One further caveat is that each of these aspects of interactivism synthesized in this article have been elaborated in

considerable depth—this article aims to provide a broad vision of this metatheory for cultural psychology, not address more detailed or nuanced justifications of these components. (p. 260)

Subsequently they write in the same vein: ‘While the interactivist model presented here is clearly not the only attempt to develop a process ontology, we will focus largely on its potential contributions—more than on cross-comparisons’ (p. 263).

This may actually be a legitimate procedure—at least for the time being. If you wish to determine, however, the status of the interactivist model and thus its innovative potential vis-à-vis other accounts, its specific surplus, in a more thorough way, just occasionally hinting at points of convergence may not be enough—at least not in the long run. Moreover, the hinting at points of convergence and consequently the evasion of extensive discussions about ‘precursors’ of the model and its relations to other past and current theories and orientations in philosophy, psychology and cultural psychology bears the danger of levelling out substantial differences, doing injustice to other approaches, favouring mere name-dropping and inviting misinterpretations. My impression is that the authors have not circumvented these dangers in every respect. Let me discuss just two examples—others might be taken as well.

Karl Marx

In discussing the potentials of their differentiation of levels of knowing Christopher and Bickhard claim to be able to model ‘the complexity that we are’ better than a number of other theorists, for example Marx (p. 282). The latter is characterized as stressing agency as being ‘engaged and embodied’ (p. 282). Such global characterizations of grand theories are per se in danger of misrepresentations: to which part of the large body of work Marx left do they actually refer to? The ‘early’, more ‘humanistic’ Marx, the ‘later’ Marx of *Das Kapital*, Marx the historian, the economist, the politician, the philosopher, the sociologist? (To name just some—obviously simplifying—alternatives.) Be it as it may. A look at two famous quotations already shows that Marx actually operates with a far more complex concept of agency and action than the authors suggest. The first quotation is taken from Marx’s work on the *coup d’état* of Louis Bonaparte:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living. (Marx, 1852/1963, p. 15)

Here, a concept of human (individual and collective) agency towards societal changes is at stake, a concept that neither degrades humans to mere epiphenomena of sociohistorical structures—they make their own history—nor elevates them to omnipotent actors—they do not make it just as they please. Thus agency is thought as situated and contextualized. But is this the same as ‘engaged and embodied’? I do not think so.

Let us turn to the second example, a paragraph taken from *Das Kapital*:

A spider conducts operations that resemble those of a weaver, and a bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement. He not only effects a change of form in the material on which he works, but he also realises a purpose of his own that gives the law to his *modus operandi*, and to which he must subordinate his will. (Marx, 1867/1967, p. 178)

Human beings—according to Marx’s argument—are different from animals in that the former can act according to plans whereas the latter cannot. However, once a human being puts a plan into reality, his or her will is subject to the activity. Is this ‘engaged and embodied’ agency?

Lev Vygotsky

Let us now consider another author who read many texts by Marx—actually the last quotation served him as a motto for one of his first significant psychological writings—but who is read much more in contemporary psychology as the prominent thinker of modern socialism: Lev Vygotsky. (The ‘spider–bee–architect example’ can be found in: Vygotsky, 1925/1997, p. 63.) His sociohistorical psychology elaborated in cooperation with Luria and Leontiev partially bears strong resemblance to the model of Christopher and Bickhard; just think of the process ontology. Therefore, it is rather embarrassing that they attribute to him a concept of internalization/interiorization that has little to do with his psychological ideas. According to the authors, internalization/interiorization is a ‘pseudo-problem’ (p. 263, and others). It is intended to bridge the gap between individual and culture, ‘to solve the problem of how what is outside the person . . . can make a lasting impact upon the person’ (p. 263)—an anyway unnecessary separation (still according to Christopher and Bickhard) which originates from faulty Cartesian and Newtonian dualisms in

Western thinking in general and psychology in particular. I have the suspicion that what the authors term a 'pseudo-problem' only becomes 'pseudo' in the hands of the authors: if you suppose that internalization/interiorization is bound to full consciousness—as I think the authors do (see p. 263)—then of course you should get rid of this 'pseudo-problem'. However, many authors (certainly not all) pondering internalization/interiorization do not claim such a thing as full consciousness in the process of internalization. Vygotsky in any case refrains from it, and I wonder where in his collected works (published in English from 1987 to 1999) Christopher and Bickhard could gather evidence for their judgement.² On the contrary, Vygotsky stresses again and again that development, enculturation and internalization/interiorization primarily occur via day-to-day social practice and participation, full consciousness being something that is reached rather late in this process (for this assessment see also—among many others—Bruner, 1985). It might suffice here to briefly recapitulate just Vygotsky's ideas about concept development in his famous book *Thinking and Speech* (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, pp. 121–166)³—a book, by the way, that contains something one may call an outline of a genuinely 'psychological hermeneutics' (cf. in particular the chapter 'Thought and Word', pp. 243–285) emphasizing the implicitness (to use one of the authors' terms) of our meaningful thinking, speaking and acting. Writings on the development of other 'higher' psychological processes—scientific concepts, memory, emotion, motivation, etc.—could have been taken as well.

As is well known, Vygotsky (and his colleagues, in particular Lev S. Sacharov) analysed concept development with the 'method of dual stimulation'. This method consists of first showing the subject several different objects varying in colour, form and dimension. Afterwards, the bottom part of one of the objects, where a senseless word is printed, is again shown to the subject. Then the subject is asked to gather all objects he or she supposes to share the same word. After each trial the experimenter corrects the subject and reveals the correct name of the object. Employing this method, Vygotsky came to the conclusion that concept development is composed of three basic stages: syncretism, complexive thinking and conceptual thinking. The stages themselves are again subdivided in distinct phases. In the first stage (syncretism) objects are subsumed to a concept: for example, because of the principle of trial and error, idiosyncratic criteria of classification or the spatial distribution of the objects. In the second stage (complexive thinking) the classification process becomes more systematic. Now certain objective features of the figures become criteria for differentiating between the objects.

Complexive thinking is subdivided into four phases. For our purposes one of these phases is especially important, namely that phase during which classifications are based on pseudo-concepts. Figures are now ordered according to objective criteria which also would be crucial for classifications based on real concepts. Vygotsky's reason for speaking of a pseudo-concept is that the child still classifies the figures according to apparent and concrete features and not—this would be characteristic for real concepts—according to certain principles of abstract thinking. These differences only become visible when the process of thought that led to the classifications is analysed. On a 'phenotype level', however, the results of the classification based on a pseudo-concept cannot be distinguished from a classification based on a real concept. They constitute, if you will, functional equivalents and make—according to Vygotsky—communication with adults a lot easier. Only at the very end of the process—after literally thousands of repeated verbally mediated interactions with adults and peers—is the child/adolescent able to make classifications based on real concepts. The core idea of all this can be put in a Hegelian notion: for the child concepts are there *as such and for others* before they are there *for him- or herself*.

My primary aim is to draw attention to a misreading. A broader discussion of the possible enrichments and corrections of the interactivist model by a comparison with sociohistorical psychology would require a research effort of its own. I am convinced that the interactivist model would strongly benefit from an intensive dialogue with this strand of psychology; a strand, by the way, that has by no means been explored in all its potentials. One of the reasons for this deplorable state of affairs is that a significant portion of work still has not been edited or translated from Russian. However, just recently several interesting writings of the 'early' Leont'ev, the voice of sociohistorical psychology least heard in US psychology (in comparison to Luria and Vygotsky, cf. Cole & Wertsch, 1988), have at least become available to a German-reading audience (cf. Leont'ev, 2001, 2006).

Concluding Remarks

Let us sum up. The critical remarks in the last section should not obscure the fact that the proposal bears valuable insights. Its value can be seen in two respects:

1. The model indeed has the potential to strengthen cultural psychology on a metatheoretical level. This is mainly reached by creative theoretical syntheses.

2. The metatheoretical level is applied to the prominent empirical studies on 'individualism' versus 'collectivism' in a heuristically fruitful way and as a result allows a new look at these data as possibly being mainly products of an explicit knowing level.

On the other hand it can be argued that the authors' proposal would benefit from a more thorough discussion of other 'related' approaches. Such a discussion is necessary insofar:

1. as it would become more transparent when the authors present the above-mentioned creative theoretical syntheses, when they do something different, and when the specific surplus of their proposal is to be sought vis-à-vis other approaches;
2. as the authors would not do injustice to other theories but could analyse in which respects those theories might enrich their own model; and
3. as misinterpretations and misrepresentations of theoretical concepts could be avoided.

Notes

1. Since I will mainly focus on past approaches below I would like to mention at least some few exemplars of current parallel theoretical work here: Boesch (1991), Cole (1996), Eckensberger (1995), Ratner (2006), Straub (2006), Valsiner (1998), Zielke (2006); an overview is presented by Boesch and Straub (2007).
2. Oddly enough, the authors do not rely on the collected works anyway but on *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* (Vygotsky, 1978), a collection of texts edited back then by Michael Cole, Vera John-Steiner, Sylvia Scribner and Ellen Soubberman. Perhaps this is one of the reasons for their misreading. With all respect to the endeavours of Cole and the other editors to make known the works of Vygotsky and also of Luria in the West (e.g. Cole, 1979a, 1979b)—not to speak of Cole's own already mentioned important advancements of cultural psychology (Cole, 1996)—the *Mind in Society* edition may nevertheless correctly be called a 'Vygotsky blending' (Keiler, 2002, p. 363).
3. It has to be mentioned that only a partial understanding of Vygotsky's analyses of concept development is possible:

... it is very difficult to grasp the classification process behind the different stages listed by Vygotsky. As happened so often in his work, he did not present the raw material in the form of protocols and he never gave an example of a classification based on a pseudo-concept versus a classification based on a real-concept. (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 267)

This, however, does not concern the core of the argument I unfold below.

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