



## Constructing positive social updrafts for extranormative personalities



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### ABSTRACT

This case study examines one high school student, a young woman from the U.S., who was diagnosed with multiple mental illnesses and who, during the research, began to identify as a lesbian. Using a framework grounded in Vygotsky's defectological writing, the authors analyze the case in light of the focal participant's engagement with the international online anime art community, which provided her with a positive social updraft through which she entered a cultural stream that enabled her to represent and reflect on her emerging identity through conventions that were not available to her in mainstream culture. Relying on artifacts from digital art production and a series of interviews, the study examines the manner in which the focal participant employed the signs, tools, goals, values, and overall setting and contours of the anime culture to develop a positive sense of self, a goal difficult for her to achieve in mainstream society. The study concludes with a discussion of how Vygotsky's work in defectology has salience for 21st century mental health differences – characterized here as extranormative or neuroatypical – because of his emphasis on viewing the settings of human development, rather than individual points of difference, as the focus of intervention.

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*[The] social educational system for the deaf is crowned by a children's communist movement, i.e., participation in the Young Pioneers, which involves children in the life of the working class and acquaints them with the experiences and struggles of adults. The heartbeat of the world is felt in the Pioneer Movement; a child learns to see himself as a participant in life on a world scale. In this child's play, the sprouts of those serious thoughts and actions ripen which will play a decisive role in this life. What is new in all of this, is that for the first time the child enters the mainstream of present day life. Moreover life is directed toward the future whereas it had been based on past historical human experience.*

*At the top level the children's Pioneer Movement turns into the Young Communist Movement, a sweeping, wide-scale, social and political education whereby the deaf-mute child lives and breathes with his whole country. His pulse, his efforts, his thoughts beat in unison with the masses.*

[Vygotsky, 1993, p. 120]

Vygotsky (1993) projected this optimistic outcome for the many thousands of children who were physically and emotionally traumatized by continual warfare on Russian soil in the opening decades of the 20th century. Although one might contest the

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degree to which the Soviets succeeded in constructing such a society,<sup>2</sup> Vygotsky's (1993) ideas on what was termed *defectology* remain salient and provocative nearly a century later, in another type of nation altogether. In spite of claims that there is a singular United States with a traditional cultural heritage (e.g., Hirsch, 1987; Romney, 2010), much evidence suggests that the U.S. is a highly pluralistic nation in which multiple pathways for development are available (Hackney, 1997), particularly in a connected global world in which technology enables access to multiple international communities of practice (Eitzen & Zinn, 2011). We find Vygotsky's views of sweeping people of physical and neurological differences into the broader cultural flow to be amenable to adaptation to our case study of one young U.S. woman's work within an international genre, the Japanese art form known as anime, to find a social and cultural niche in spite of having an atypical neurological makeup that made life in the physical company of others a frequent challenge.

In this paper we first lay out those aspects of Vygotsky's (1993) views on the education of children who navigate life with physical makeups that fall outside the evolutionary norm, particularly those who are deaf, blind, mentally traumatized, or otherwise differently equipped. Our effort is not designed to incorporate every aspect of Vygotsky's defectological writing, but rather to distill his ideas to what is appropriate for our conception of neurological variation, especially that known as *mental illness*. After establishing his perspective on human difference and then outlining his view of the potential of mediational pathways toward satisfying lives, we focus on one young woman, Chloe (all names and places are pseudonyms), who faced life with multiple diagnoses of mental illness. We look at her construction of self within the mediational channels provided by one popular culture avenue, the Japanese anime movement: the art form centered on graphic novels and animated films and abetted by a multitude of online media for widespread international participation (Black, 2008; Black & Steinkuehler, 2008).

These channels illustrate the construct of a *positive social updraft*, by which we mean an activity system that enables full involvement in worthwhile cultural action, particularly among those who are considered to be social or cultural outsiders who might otherwise be limited in opportunities for legitimate social participation. This metaphor may be applied to engagement in many pursuits, from players of particular video games to participants in youth music programs, the context in which we first referred to this construct in print (Walker & Smagorinsky, 2013). In this study we focus on one type of positive social updraft, that experienced by case study participant Chloe, a youth classified as mentally ill, who further began to identify as a lesbian and who in general experienced life as an outsider. The data suggest that Chloe found acceptance, reinforcement, a community of fellow artists, friendship, feedback, and a means of growth in the online anime community.

The metaphor of *updraft* is taken from the process of wind currents such as those that are swept up a chimney. These currents not only have an upward motion themselves, but they also catch other elements in their draft and carry them up in their flow. The idea of a wind draft is also evident among racers who follow other competitors in order to be drawn along in the air currents created by opponents who precede them on the course. A social updraft provides cultural mediational means that include people in a teleological current headed "upward" – in this case, toward the cultural schemata that to Vygotsky (1987) enable participation in social groups (Cole, 1996) – and thus allow people of atypical makeups to become fully involved in significant cultural activity that brings them a feeling of social belonging.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> The violence – with roots dating to the mid-19th century (Figes, 1997) – began with the 1904–1905 Russo-Japanese War, in which Japan defeated Russia in a dispute over control of Manchuria and Korea. During the war, the populist strikes that begat the Russian Revolution of 1905 began, an uprising that was defeated yet that resulted in continual unrest in response to subsequent Tsarist repression. The conflicts moved to external enemies with the onset of World War I in 1914, and took a second internecine turn with the Russian Revolution, which erupted during World War I in opposition to the Tsar's conduct of war against Germany and its allies. The overthrow of the Tsar in the 1917 Revolution, with World War I intensely underway, produced a power vacuum that was contested in the Russian Civil War from 1917 to 1922 and its aftermath lasting until 1924, the year of the certification of the Soviet Constitution, Lenin's death, and the subsequent power struggle within the Politburo that produced a violent process of ascension for Stalin. Following these decades of intense conflict that served as the setting for his early life, and uplifted by the possibilities of a more inclusive society envisioned at the launch of the Soviet Union, Vygotsky (1993) believed that The Pioneer and Young Communist Movements would provide what we call the *positive social updraft* through which injured children could be swept up in mainstream social currents such that, rather than being considered as damaged and deficient, they would be viewed as different in capability yet not deficient in social status, societal value, and cultural contribution. To Vygotsky, an inclusive Soviet culture could be achieved through these movements by providing a single social channel toward a more enlightened and equitable nation, one that could provide the model for the rest of Europe to abandon its class-based inequalities and move toward more collectivist and representative approaches to social organization. Vygotsky's optimism for the potential of Soviet communism was betrayed by Stalin's brutal, totalitarian means of collectivizing the Ukrainian peasants' farmlands and food supplies in order to support the more urban industrialized society he sought to force into being (Snyder, 2010). In 1932–1933 alone, well over 3 million Soviet Ukrainians starved when their farmlands were seized and the demands on them for increased production resulted in immense suffering, with rape, beatings, execution, and other crimes administered to those who resisted in any form and cannibalism, prostitution, and other degradations serving as the peasants' last resorts in surviving the famine that, ironically, occurred in one of Europe's most productive agrarian regions as a consequence of Stalin's policies. The Young Pioneers and Young Communists were given a role in starving the peasants to feed the proletariat. As described by Snyder, "Members of the Young Communists served in the brigades that requisitioned food. Still, younger children, in the Pioneers, were supposed to be 'the eyes and ears of the party inside the family.' The healthier ones were assigned to watch over the fields to prevent theft. Half a million preadolescent and young teenage boys and girls stood in the watch towers observing adults in the Soviet Ukraine in summer 1933. All children were expected to report on their parents" (p. 50). The notion of a *positive social updraft* that we offer in this paper assumes, as did Vygotsky, that immersion in mainstream social life engages one in pro-social, rather than pernicious and deadly social currents.

<sup>3</sup> Although the term "positive" is relative in interpretation, on the whole it refers to socially constructive practices that lead toward the achievement of cultural ends. Some cultural practices and the larger purposes toward which they are put could be considered other than positive for the broader society. In the U.S., for example, participation in street gang life, while providing disenfranchised youth with a sense of belonging, could not be considered positive because gang initiation rites often involve felony behaviors of rape, murder, robbery, and other offenses against others, and continued conduct of this sort is typically required of continuing membership (Huff, 1990). The notion of "positive" becomes problematic when a whole society, such as Nazi Germany, is organized to promote destruction of other cultures, leading to conduct deemed positive from within but negative from without. Our use of the term assumes that a positive social updraft contributes to a constructive orientation to social life broadly speaking. We state this requirement with the understanding that the society from which we write this paper, the 21st century United States, was founded by European émigrés whose actions toward the continent's indigenous people were considered positive from their own perspective, but catastrophic and persistent through modern times from the aboriginal standpoint (Four Arrows, 2006).

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