



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Learning, Culture and Social Interaction

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/lcsi

The collective work of engineering losers

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 18 January 2016
 Received in revised form 28 March 2016
 Accepted 31 March 2016
 Available online xxxx

Keywords:

Joint work
 Vygotsky
 Personality
 Societal relations
 Material conditions
 Ethnomethodology

ABSTRACT

According to Vygotsky, personality is the ensemble of real relations that we have lived with others. If personality is the ensemble of societal relations, and if who people are coincides with the material conditions of their productions, then school-based games that produce failure may contribute in non-negligible ways to the production of loser personalities. A case study is used to exhibit the kind of *collective* work by means of which failures and losers are recognizably produced and are produced for being recognized as such. The study thereby develops a political dimension of Vygotskian theory not frequently encountered.

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As individuals express their lives, so they are. What they are therefore coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce. What individuals are depends on the material conditions of their production. (Marx & Engels, 1978, p. 21, original emphasis) [T]he person = a clot of societal relations. ... Personality is an ensemble of societal relations. (Vygotskij, 2005, p. 1030)

"He has never won," says Alice, a five-year-old kindergarten student about her peer Jamie, who just has failed another time at a classroom task, which involves remembering the complete set of ten things that the children had been shown earlier in the day. We are near the end of May, and since the preceding November they had been working on this task, slated as a game. A track record has been established that everyone in the 26-student class can see and has participated in establishing. Jamie has never won. The statement in fact constitutes the reply turn that marks the preceding turn as a question: "Is he going to win?" Jamie never won, and, implied as a possibility in Alice's constative reply, there is a possibility that he never will. He has been losing at the game and perhaps will end up being tagged as a loser.

In both introductory quotations, the nature of individuals, personality, is attributed to production and relations with others in society. In such a framework, if someone loses all of the time, as Jamie does, there is a good possibility he will end up being a loser. The research question answered in this study, however, is not whether Jamie ultimately will or will not win; instead, it concerns the collective, societal (joint), and culturally specific work that people do, not merely perceivably but indeed for the purpose to be perceived. *What are the endogenous methods and work by means of which failure and, in the long run, losers are produced visibly and for the purpose to be seen as societal and cultural fact?*

The study was designed to be a contribution to the cultural–historical theory of Vygotsky, who, near the end of his life, proposed *experience* [pereživanie] as a relevant category (Vygotsky, 1994). This category refers to the unity/identity [*edinstvo*]

E-mail address: mroth@uvic.ca.<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2016.03.003>

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Please cite this article as: Roth, W.-M., The collective work of engineering losers, *Learning, Culture and Social Interaction* (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.lcsi.2016.03.003>

of person and environment, here denoted by {person | environment}. The relevant environment, however, is not the same for those present in some situation, which Vygotsky exemplifies in a case of three children with an abusive mother. Vygotsky did not address in his text on the environment the fact that human beings not only undergo their conditions but also contribute to producing them (Marx & Engels, 1978). Thus, the experienced environment is different for Jamie and Alice and therefore has different consequences for their developmental trajectories. It is not that the “environment” does something to the child, whether or not it is captured by “[learning]D[isability],” and therefore affects its developmental trajectory (e.g., McDermott, 1993). Instead, {person | environment} is to be understood transactionally and, therefore, is irreducible to individual actions, those of the child or the environment. Because Alice, other students, and teachers are part of Jamie’s environment, anything cultural (including winning and losing) is produced endogenously (i.e., within that setting). That is, this study exhibits the work by means of which students like Jamie contribute producing the environment to which they are subject and subjected and in which they fail. Thus, whereas a child does not produce its LD (Varenne & McDermott, 1998), Jamie does contribute to producing to the visibility of his continued losing at the game of remembering.

The answer articulated here focuses on the societal relations, which, according to the introductory quotation from Vygotsky’s work, will have been the origin of personality once a person is identified as (permanent) loser. The study is framed in the spirit of the first opening quotation, in which Marx/Engels state that what human beings are is the result not only *what* they produce—in Jamie’s case, a number of remembered items short of the entire list—but also, and perhaps more importantly, *how* they produce. A study conducted in Australia shows that the real object/motive of schools, the production of grades and grade reports, coproduces subject-matter-specific or school failure and, thereby, the losers at the game of schooling (Roth & McGinn, 1998). The nature of the work that produces failure is the topic of the current study, and this work is cultural and collective in the nature, condition, and result of societal relations. These relations are the genetic origin of personality, as Vygotsky suggests in the second quotation. In his expression that he had culled from Marx/Engels, the ensemble of societal relations that a person participates in is congealed in his personality. Whereas a similar statement about higher psychological functions can be read in one way only—a function was a relation first, but not all relations become psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1989)—in the case of personality, no such constraint was formulated.

1. Societal relations, inequality, and personality

In the second introductory quotation, Vygotsky states that societal relations are at the origin of what people later become, as Marx/Engels state. Societal relations were investigated in an important study of cultural stereotypes, which exhibited the reproductive cycle of relations that reproduce gender inequality in mathematics (Walkerdine, 1988). The study shows how cultural stereotypes are both the source and the outcome of gender inequities—e.g., lower participation rates, unequal job opportunities, and lower incomes. Apparently innocent suggestions in school handouts encourage mothers and their daughters to engage in tasks—measuring and weighing while cooking or handling money and counting while shopping—that reproduce traditional types of generally invisible housework often conducted by women. In this work, mathematics has a particular role tied to the gender-typical work. That is, in their society-specific relations, mothers and girls—despite all positive intentions to help the latter to get better at doing mathematics—reproduce inequitable societal relations. It is in such relations that school failure is not only produced but also visibly inscribed as school failure in the classroom, making it publically available for every participant to witness (McDermott, 1993). Both the production and identification of success and failure are continued achievements that do not stop with schooling but continue on “with no fixed ending” (Varenne, Goldman, & McDermott, 1997) and, thereby, become determinant features in human development.

The production of inequitable societal relations continues and indeed tends to be acerbated at school. The very *raison d’être* of schooling was the production—by means of the organization of physical space, time, and forms of societal relations—of a hierarchically ordered student body, a hierarchy that provided differential access to subsequent employment opportunities (Foucault, 1975). Ethnographic studies in modern school settings provide evidence that the outcome of this production is a function of class origin: at school, middle- and upper-class students find again their culture-specific relations with others, which thereby come to be reinforced, whereas working-class students experience clashes between their own and school culture (Eckert, 1989; Varenne et al., 1997; Willis, 1977). As a result, working-class students tend to end up in working class, whereas middle- and upper-class students reproduce, and end up in the class of their parents. Thus, for example, in Belgium, as in many other countries, there are class-related inequalities with respect to accessing tertiary studies (e.g., Van Campenhoudt, Dell’ Aquila, & Dupriez, 2008). France “beats the records of injustice” when it comes to success in schools, exhibiting itself as “incapable to make succeed the children of the least privileged” (Battaglia & Collas, 2013). In Germany, working class students not only are under-represented in the academic, university preparatory stream of schooling but also their achievement is significantly lower, correlating with parent education, number of books at home, and socio-economic status (Maaz, Baeriswyl, & Trautwein, 2011). However, societal class and the associated relations alone do not account for failure, and even children from wealthy families may not measure up in school tasks and testing (McDermott, 1993) although their parents tend to do a lot so that they may win in the educational race (Varenne et al., 1997).

Little attended to in the above-mentioned ethnographies tend to be the serious cognitive consequences that societal relations have for the individual participant. Thus, it is said that “any higher psychological function ... was the societal relation between two people” (Vygotsky, 1989, p. 56). In addition to the higher psychological functions themselves, the relations between these functions also have their genetic origin as the real societal relations between people (Vygotsky, 1989). The consequence is that the personality of an individual comes to be the ensemble of the societal relations he or she has lived in the past.¹ Personality is not

¹ The Russian philosopher E. V. Il'enkov also articulated this position, which was debated by D. Bakhurst, who contested it, and a number of Russian philosophers including F. T. Mikhailov, V. A. Lektorsky, V. S. Bibler, and V. V. Davidov (Bakhurst et al., 1995).

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