

Time! For *Engaged Psychology* to Integrate Personal and Collective Development: Commentary on Glick (2014), De Mattos and Branco (2014), Lordelo (2014) and Roychoudhury and Gardner (2014).

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This commentary identifies three theoretical tenets highlighted across four articles in this issue, discusses how the research presented in each article enacts those tenets, and then proposes the practice of *engaged research* as an important next step for research with such foundational tenets. Although stated in somewhat different terms, the shared theoretical points include that human development involves the interaction of individuals and society; active engagement is central in this process, and culturally generated symbol systems mediate developmental interactions. I argue that research with rigorous designs and analyses in the context of meaningful practices is crucial to the viability of those ideas. Given the importance of context, interaction, activity, and symbolic expression for mediating individual (personal) and social (collective) development in this challenging and changing world, engaged research methods are urgent, if the expansive humanity proposed by the theoretical ideas is to have an impact on practice, policy, and eventually new theory.

Theory offered across these articles suggests the need for *engaged research* on the mutual development of individuals and society. Highlighting several shared theoretical tenets and concepts discussed in these papers, I argue that those same ideas about the interactive nature of development beg for research methods that are likewise interactive. Although for many years, a guiding observation has been that there's "nothing as practical as a good theory" (Lewin), contemporary global circumstances challenging human development indicate that theory is only as good as studies of daily life to confirm, contest, complete, or extend theory. Authors of the articles listed above concur on several tenets of a theory proposed in and extended throughout the 20th century. Some of these authors put the theory to work in relation to problems in current realities and eventually may offer new insights. In this commentary, I review the theoretical tenets and concepts appealing to those authors, and to this author, note relevant differences, and primarily, focus on whether presenting concepts with small scale illustrations can serve our understandings of human development in the 21st century. Theories that posit personal and collective development via cultural media (language, movement, music, other semiotic systems) potentially have much to offer. Nevertheless, if symbolic systems are central as developmental mechanisms, discourse in research must be central to the design, analysis, and interpretation of meaning and human life.

These authors agree that human development is a collective (co-constructed) process of individuals and society; this process is interactive (dialogic) via culturally created mechanisms (cultural tools, semiotic systems), and those meanings (including goals of society, values, and activities in daily life) are complex - that is changing over time, over situation, and relationship. In spite of implicit debates across the articles about the direction of societal and personal influence, all argue, with slightly different concepts that culture is an active collective project, the results of which are to be discovered by research focusing on meaning-making and human development, rather than pre-determined by an abstract goal or telos.

The theoretical arguments and issues presented in these articles have been around and, to some extent, expanded with extensive scholarship across the 20th century and up to the present. We can marshal several overlapping concepts toward practice and research that could offer new insights about how individuals interact with societies that subject them to instability and injustice and about how societies fail to develop when they limit the development of great numbers of their people. To launch this commentary, I ask readers to consider how the activity and language of research projects and articles about them enact those same tenets.

SHARED TENETS AND CONCEPTS

A contribution of these articles as a group is the reiteration of certain ideas about human development from socio-cultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978), also referred to in these papers as cultural-historical theory, semiotic cultural psychology, and dialogical self theory.

Common Theoretical Arguments/Concepts:

Human development is interactive, dialogical, and between individual and society:

Arguing that development is “between people, not within people,” Glick posits a “dialogical” perspective. About the dialogical process, he comments that the issue is about “the construal of the meaning of the interaction, the trying to understand the reason for being of this interaction with this strange adult?” (Glick, 2014, p. 46) which we can apply forward to interview studies. He explains that what is lost in research employing, for example, the clinical interview diagnostically for pre-determined achievements toward a specific end point, rather than dialogically are “... other features of the child’s thinking.” With numerous studies examining interactions in actual processes, scholars have identified what appear to be spontaneous, innovative, yet reasonable and relevant ways of knowing (Au, 1980; Daiute, 2010; 2014; Delpit, 1985; Dyson, 1993; Heath, 1983; Lee, 1993; Moll, 1983; Palinscar & Brown, 1984). Why do the methods in these and hundreds of other recent empirical studies not count as dialogical? Why can’t we start from the situated findings of those authors and move further? These rigorous studies employing a range of methods in actual settings all, for example, seek goals, meanings, and processes defined and/or developed by the participants, including participants with different histories, in different social spheres of practice (education, community centers, families, digital technologies, and

so on), interacting toward goals that were neither pre-determined nor to be diagnosed. Without reviewing those studies, we remain in a loop as to what the proposed dialogical approach can now offer to move understanding and action about human development ahead.

De Mattos and Branco make a similar point about the dialogical nature of meaning and development, which they consider empirically in terms of the value “responsibility,” as young people discuss it. They extend the general idea of dialogical meaning making to inquire into the “semiotic construction of a system of personal values as resulting from the active internalization of social interaction processes occurring within specific cultural contexts. The system of personal values is seen here as continuously configured and (re)configured (within self as well as with the research interviewer) according to the principles of the dialogical, mutual constitution of individuals within society” (de Mattos & Branco, 2014 p. 13). Lordelo also addresses this interactive process with working children’s interpretations of the concepts “child” and “work” so commonly accepted in adult worlds. Roychoudhury and Gardner go even further to define the interactive nature of individual and society in terms of young people’s interactions with multiple others who are also making sense of their environments (including peers, educators, and the President). With this range of actual and virtual (Bakhtin, 1986) interlocutors, young people use expressive media (lyrics, dance, narratives, letters) to enact and to consider an international cultural mode – hop hop. Social interaction plays out in the methods of research in educational contexts such that each participant expresses and reflects, not only with a researcher, teacher, peer, or authoritative figure but also with at least several of these to express meaning across dialogical relationships.

These articles all argue for dialogical development, connecting the personal and the collective, with each successive study offering more detail about what that means in specific contexts of research and/or practice, and, in two of the articles, what the findings offer for ongoing developments of interactive developmental processes. Reading the articles, we learn that this idea of the interactive development of individual and society continues to have sway with scholars and that some of us may be unsatisfied with whether and how the idea has been examined over the past century. The repetition of the idea may also indicate frustration that the compelling ideas and previous research emphasizing the dialogical/interactional nature of development in education, workplace, community centers, families, social services, and beyond have not had an impact or a lasting impact in those perceived institutions. To that point, Roychoudhury and Gardner (2014) and Lordelo (2014) in their articles mention the need to re-visit ideas and implementations of those ideas for goals like inclusive and equal participation in society across historical periods. A challenge ahead for all of us who posit the interaction and integrative nature of human development is to include perspectives across time as well as spatial context as units of expression and analysis, in part to explain the necessity of repeating theoretical premises. Time is clearly an important dimension, but interactions with an interviewer over time may not provide the range of dialogical complexity the theory promises. For example, reflecting on responsibility with the same researcher over time may actually narrow the focus of what responsibility means, how it occurs in life, and how it is relevant to self-reflection. Expanding dialogical interlocutors around the issue of responsibility could

create the kind of tension that interaction implies and that development clearly must involve. Alternatively, enhancing dialogue with one's former self could be revealing when researchers provide concrete examples of a participant's former comments for subsequent reflection. As we discuss later, we must also provide rigorous research as foundations for individual and social change over time.

Personal cultures and collective cultures are organized in different spheres of activity and meaning

A second shared idea across these articles is that while personal culture has a relatively small range of continuity and change, collective cultures can vary by social and political organization. There is no one collective organization that an individual encounters and interacts with, and there may be diverse orientations (affects, understandings, etc.) that an individual brings to bear on interacting with diverse collectives. Three of the studies examine personal culture in relation to specific socio-cultural contexts, thereby offering insights into the specific meanings and values that emerge as relevant (de Mattos & Branco, 2014), consistent and divergent (Lordelo, 2014; Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2014). In the most precise elaboration of this idea about interacting spheres of activity, meaning, and development, Roychoudhry and Gardner (2014) organize research design whereby the young people in a school-based rap narrative program address school culture, which imposes certain limits as well as opportunities, peer culture which serves as a major audience for performance, and mainstream American culture, represented by President Obama, to whom the students direct one of their written expressions. Dimensions of each of these social cultures emerge in relation to the young participants' interactions with them.

In order to expand the concepts of "personal culture" and "collective culture," scholars must go beyond pre-determined concepts to nuances in such specific situations. Although not focused specifically on the value of "responsibility" as in the de Mattos and Branco research, the Roychoudhury and Gardner research opens other values emerging in diverse expressive genres within and across collectives relevant to the youth hip hop program. In addition, three of these articles discuss research on contemporary topics, framed in terms of social issues, including disadvantaged youth (de Mattos & Branco, 2014), child labor in situations of economic need (Lordelo, 2014), and culturally relevant pedagogy for youth who have not succeeded in other programs (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2014). Foundational ideas offered in the articles point to the need for research related to such issues. Nevertheless, the studies vary in terms of whether and how they enact theory for engaged research consistent with shared ideas about personal and collective development.

Personal and collective cultures interact in symbol (semiotic) systems that play material roles in processes and meanings

The third common idea reaching back to Vygotsky and beyond is that individual – societal interaction is mediated in symbolic communication, developed in culture, used in cultural relations, and, in some cases, transformed toward new meanings. The difference between mediated meaning and reproduced meaning emerges in detailed analyses of interactions –

such as changes in Jane's sense of responsibility over time (de Mattos & Branco, 2014), differences between working children's meanings of "child" and "work" (Lordelo, 2014), and high school students' enactments of dynamic interplay in hip hop lyrics, letters, and performances (Roychoudhury & Gardner, 2014). The Lordelo, Roychoudhury and Gardner, and de Mattos and Branco articles discuss this mediational process in different ways required for theoretical consideration.

PRACTICING SOCIO-CULTURAL THEORY IN RESEARCH

Socio-cultural theory posits development in activity, in part because meaning-making and development occur with symbolic media that embody culture, interaction, and change. Socio-cultural theory can deliver on its promise when we practice these concepts in our research designs and analyses. Toward that end, I offer several suggestions to overcome the contradictions inherent in re-statements of socio-cultural principles and concepts outside the realm of rigorous research in the field where it matters. By rigorous research, I mean, research that involves participants to interact in a variety of relationships – or dialogical configurations – necessary for engaging social meanings. Rigor thus is not only or primarily a quality of quantitative or experimental research but also of research that allows meaning to emerge in the complexity of relationships, purposes, situations, settings, and times.

From the perspective that there is nothing as theoretical as practices designed to promote personal and collective development, this next section focuses on methods of inquiry and argumentation across the focal articles for this commentary.

Glick (2014) reviews arguments relevant to defining culture and ideas that could be useful for teasing out personal and collective dimensions of culture. De Mattos and Branco (2014) present a case study from a five-year longitudinal interview study with Jane, a "disadvantaged Brazilian youth between 16 – 24 years of age, who participated in an apprenticeship developed by an NGO. Lordelo (2014) presents case studies with semi-structured interviews of two working children in Brazil, to learn about how their meanings of relevant concepts compare to commonly accepted meanings in the broader culture. Roychoudhury and Gardner (2014) embed designs and analyses of values guiding expressions by high school students in programs that make rap – which is meaningful to the participating youth – central to education as well as to the history of civil rights for minorities in the United States.

In their article "Exploring the intersection of personal and collective meanings: 'Responsibility' in the transition to adulthood", de Mattos and Branco (2014) integrate the personal and the cultural in the concept "responsibility" and do socio-cultural justice to that concept by examining it in detail with young people struggling at the borders of irresponsibility – by the state, institutions, and presumably by the youth as well. De Mattos and Branco examine responsibility from a cultural psychological perspective where "it can be conceived as an affective semiotic field that operates as a value orientation of human actions." (p. 10) The goal of this article is "... to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamic construction of a personal system of values, addressing how, in a specific time in

ontogeny – transition to adulthood – cultural canalization processes interact with human agency to produce specific meanings (i.e. values) that regulate human conduct” (p. 12).

In their article, de Mattos and Branco use a case method based on interviews over five years to study Jane’s transition from adolescence to young adulthood, through her reflection on the meaning of “responsibility”. By isolating Jane’s identifications of critical moments in her acting and reflecting as a responsible person, the authors explain that, “along the lines of a dialogical-semiotic approach to the self, it is possible to understand the intricate interplay among Jane’s positions as an attempt to overcome ambivalence. In dealing with ambivalences emerging at different contexts, Jane builds new meanings to orient her experiences, and constructs a hierarchy of affect-laden meanings related to the notion of responsibility, and those may bring a relative stability to her self-system over time.” The isolation of responsibility – a relational phenomenon - as a unit of analysis integrating personal and collective cultures is an excellent strategy for focusing on the dynamic nature of meaning and development.

The analysis of the Jane interviews as one among ten raises several questions in terms of socio-cultural and semiotic theoretical concepts discussed above and in the de Mattos and Branco paper. First, as a semiotic means of development, enactment of “responsibility” in action, that is in Jane’s explanations of others’ and her own interactions might reveal different meanings than those expressed in an interview with a researcher. If values are semiotic means, they would, after all, mediate activity implicitly and not only serve as explicit meta-cognitive comments. Even though values are deeply held ways of knowing and behaving, values are enacted in discourse, not independently of it, as has been shown in previous research where individuals and groups expressed differently value-laden meanings when interacting with diverse others for different purposes (Daiute, 2014; Daiute, et al, 1993; Daiute, Stern & Leliutiu-Weinberger, 2003). The affordances of specific genres, such as whether they are meant to share first hand experience (such as in autobiographical narratives) or to comment on experiences at some distance (such as in interviews) have also proved to make a big difference in meaning. A study focused on semiotics could, moreover, examine language of expression closely for the nuances of meaning that may not come through in thematic analysis alone. Perhaps, within interviews over time, there could be different discursive genres (brief narratives, answers to direct questions, posing of hypothetical situations) that involve diverse semiotic affordances broadening the complexity of the researcher-researched interview.

In addition, enacted phenomena are likely to present somewhat differently than the phenomena isolated out of practice and familiar social relations. Given the authors’ emphasis on affect and co-construction, examining values in practice – where affect may be less controlled because of the co-construction of activities – seems all the more important and revealing as a possible complement to analyses of interviews. For example, it would be interesting and consistent with the goal and theory to expand Jane’s participation around responsibility for audiences other than researchers. Ambivalence is quite interesting as it emerged in the single case study, but what would emerge as ambivalence in an interview with a researcher might not emerge thus in interactions with peers, for example. Another question is how the researchers defined “critical moments” – whether those are critical for

the researchers, how they were determined, or whether they were indicated in some specific way as critical for Jane. Finally, the focus on the individual separately from analysis of other individuals and a specific collective group makes the intersection of personal and collective cultures somewhat vague. It is possible, however, with this focus on an important value such as responsibility, that the analysis of additional cases and designs in future studies could extend to expressions by those at other scales of activity (such as parents, teachers, and peers) in the responsibility meaning-making and acting process. This case study report provides an excellent foundation for moving beyond the individual unit of analysis to various relevant collectives.

The conclusion of the article states that “Jane’s transition can be characterized by the integration and empowerment of certain affective-laden meanings, her values of *responsibility*. Such values facilitated a self-reconfiguration and the emergence of a new dynamic stability in her self-system. The value of responsibility took a central role in this process, allowing her not only to deal with everyday life difficulties, but also to regulate her present and future actions. Its emergence and operation also dynamically reconfigured her self-system at the intersections of collective and personal cultures.” (p. 23) This claim is compelling, yet the methods do not warrant claims about “empowerment” nor the developmental influence of Jane’s reflections on “responsibility”. Nevertheless, this conclusion seems like a good place to begin future studies with increasingly robust, individually and socially diversified discourses, engaging “responsibility” as a cultural tool positioned in different ways to illustrate, define, and perhaps eventually create theory about the use of such concepts for empowerment and their mediating functions.

Given the apt points about the interactive, collage-like nature, of constructing values via interpretation processes, moving beyond single case studies seems a relevant next step for articulating definitions of values and their construction. Previous research on values has done so in one case with examinations of contestations of values in traditional societies where those in minority positions find some of those values to be personally unfair (Turiel, 2002) and in another study where different teachers and their students constructed, contested, and reconstructed values in a social issues curriculum (Daiute, Stern, & Leliutu-Weinberger 2003). The goals of those studies were not identity development per se but the interaction of personal and multi-cultural values, so they provide interesting connections with the goals and approach of the de Mattos and Branco study. As stated by these authors, as well, values integrate affect and cognition in social interaction, so they are extending examination of development with whole person and human agency perspectives.

In summary, the database of narratives collected in this longitudinal study provides a wealth of detail for moving beyond abstractions. What becomes evident from this single case study and promising for future inquiry is not necessarily a focus on “identity” (which slips into the discussion, thereby extending “dialogic self” into a somewhat different abstract realm) but a focus on the development of values, like “responsibility,” that link and distinguish individuals and cultures.

In her article, “Children and the meanings of work: between personal culture and collective culture,” Lia da Rocha Lordelo aims to address the theoretical question “How do people

(children) create, maintain and transform knowledge that belongs both to individual cognition and to a sociocultural domain?" (Markova, 2000, p. 110) "Through the analysis of two working children's speeches and the meanings they produce concerning work and childhood, it is possible to notice, the dynamic – and semiotic – relationship between meanings from the personal and the collective culture." (Lordelo, 2014, p. 27) "Viewing culture as a set of processes raises the question of the nature of these processes. What are these processes? How can they be conceptualized? Many psychologists and anthropologists have conceptualized cultural processes in semiotic terms." (Lordelo, 2014, p. 29)

Lordelo focuses on "cases of two children [of original 10] from our investigation: Robson, a 9-year-old working boy, and Carina, an 11-year-old working girl, and adults in the children's lives. Both children reside in the rural zone of the State of Bahia, in Brazil". After presenting brief profiles of the children's work and school lives, Lordelo conducted semi-structured interviews investigating themes such as childhood, school, work, family and future, to describe their daily activities, and to share impressions of pictures depicting children playing, studying or working inside the home. The researcher reported analyzing the corpus with hermeneutic-dialectical analysis (Minayo, 1998).

The design of this study enacts personal and collective domains well – including interventions with adults (presumably enacting the societal meanings) as well as children – and by eliciting narratives of daily life as well as interviews abstracted away from the cultural practices of work and school. Those concepts are, as mentioned above, enacted differently across contexts and in relation to different discursive arrangements where they are shared. Children's and adults' narrations of potentially relevant pictures and daily routines offer variation from the separated discourse of interviews about childhood labor. Defining and illustrating "core meaning" would enhance the presentation of this analysis and offer insights into how children express their meanings, which may not always be taken as seriously as in the present research. The design of future data analyses could, for example, compare explanations (in the interviews) and enactments (in the narratives of daily routines and pictures) across the genres by children and adults. Analyzing specific linguistic indicators in the analysis would add theoretical consistency to the studies.

If socio-cultural and semiotic cultural psychologists believe that differences are not in the head of the individual or is some abstract universal but in the interactional semiotics, then details of the semiotic media gathered in the research must be taken seriously as the material of co-construction. From the fascinating design of the Lordelo study, the research could ask further "How do the findings apply within and across cases (in narratives and interviews) and across personal and cultural scales of activity and meaning? Examining these meanings across genres would integrate semiotic media with meaning more closely. For example, when analyzing children's meanings as socially and semiotically relational and dynamic, inviting their experience and knowledge in relation to different purposes and audiences seems crucial in developmental research. Narrating from diverse speaker/writer-purpose-audience relations with diverse cultural tools foregrounds the complexity of children's, like adults', meanings and development in relation to culture (Daiute, 2010; 2014).

Roychoudhry and Gardner (2014) illustrate such complexity with social practice intervention research design. In their article, they describe a method of embedding research in ongoing practice organized across the classroom and school spheres of activity and values. With a range of oral and written individual and collaborative rap and academic narratives produced over time, Roychoudhry and Gardner involved participants in myriad social relational positions around the activity and meaning of rap in young people's lives and in American life. They asked students to write letters to the president arguing for the hip hop program, explaining its nature and importance, as well as creating hip hop lyrics individually and collectively, in writing and performance. The system of values organizing the letters included "Critical Thought and Reflection, Emotional Expression, Hope and Overcoming". In the analysis of rap narratives, values emerged including "Heroism, Dynamic Interplay between the Collective and the Individual, Emotional Expression and Overcoming". In a subsequent phase of the analysis, the researchers found that "Dynamic interplay"—defined as "the simultaneity of the personal and the social in the realm of meaning making"—characterized hip hop lyrics at the beginning of the intervention and at the end emerged in the academic writing genre framed in letters about why schools should include hip hop programs. A comparison of these patterns across the genres indicates that rap narratives may be influencing the values of resilience and hope in the letters as observed between time points where the majority of the rap narratives were constructed. This practice-based research design revealed that values are relational – expressed in different ways by persons interacting with others in similar social spheres (peers) and more distant yet important social spheres (the President). We, thus, learn about how values vary by expression within and across persons and social actors in other relational domains.

Theory is important, especially when theory breaks with long-standing scholarly traditions that seem at odds with everyday life. Socio-cultural theory of human development still seems like such a radical approach in the broader field of psychology. Much of the appeal comes from the potential for putting socio-cultural ideas into practice to shift from assumptions about psychology, learning, and development that persist with concepts and methods that objectify, stereotype, and stagnate people whose lives are threatened by the broader organization of civilizations, societies, and culture itself, as is occurring today with globalization processes that put capital accumulation ahead of human development. Ideas posited by Vygotsky and others expanding his work over the past hundred years may still be relevant but to know whether and how they may be relevant requires examination in the context of the rapidly changing environments and life courses that challenge individual and societal development. Situations like migration, inequality, conflict, displacement, social divisions and discriminations occur in complex social, political, and economic circumstances, so the their enactments must be identified and analyzed in detail.

The Need for *Engaged Research* with those Tenets and Concepts:

With "culture" -- personal, collective, interactive -- front and center across the articles in this issue, we must ask about the culture of each research investigation. Cultures are defined in part by practices and tools, so for research these are the methods. Extending the definitions of culture across these articles, I argue that the principles of socio-cultural and semiotic cultural psychology require engaged inquiry. We thus consider how the research

is embedded in and engaged in the cultures it attempts to study. Focusing on theory and illustrating theory with small case studies will not add the analytic power required for dealing with contemporary developmental challenges, nor do justice to the amazing foundational theory. Case studies can add detail to illustrate a new theory or theoretical concept, but after ideas have been defined and illustrated with examples, extending the concepts for examination in actual contexts requires methodological complexity as well as theoretical complexity. For example, if meaning (of self and/or the empirical world) develops interactively, then diverse meanings would emerge in diverse interactive arrangements (Daiute, 2014; Lordelo; Roychoudhry & Gardner). Research interviews involve stepping back from phenomena of interest, even when they involve reflecting on one's own history. Interviewing over time, as did de Mattos and Branco, involves some situational diversity although not diversity of audience or other relational dimensions. We have found in previous research, for example, that children, adolescents, and adults narrate personal experiences in ways that conform to the interactive context more than to any stable individual foundation. As mentioned earlier, responsibility is an extremely important dimension of self-presentation. For that reason, an individual reflecting on her own responsibility would narrate to an authoritative other (such as a researcher) in terms of assumptions about the researcher's values and expectations, values in the surrounding situation and so on. With the narrator exposed in this way and wanting to offer what she might view as a self-presentation relevant to the interview context, a likely emphasis in the telling would be that it matches social desirability. This relational framing of discourse is the essence of Bakhtin's concept "addressivity" (Bakhtin, 1986). Lordelo's design addresses this implicitly by selecting focal concepts as those givens in society and the elicitation of participants' diverse ways of enacting those concepts. Addressivity is an explicit factor in Roychoudhry and Gardner's research designs with their elicitation of diverse narratives framed in terms of diverse speaker/author-purpose-audience relationships.

Psychology, now more than ever, requires engaged research. The researcher must be embedded in the culture – meaning-making practices and interactions – including holding his/her own perspective as well as that of the social context (as a culture or cultures) out for mutual examination. This is the crux of "engaged research" consistent with all the theoretical perspectives among these four articles. Socio-cultural theory also applies to research cultures. Extending those shared concepts, we must posit that our research projects are also cultures involving immediate practices as well as historical traditions. Below, I have space to offer a few comments about engaged research, which is discussed in more detail in recent publications.

Dimensions of engaged research

A complete discussion of engaged research is beyond the scope of this commentary, so below are some of the major dimensions in terms of the theoretical concepts offered in this issue.

Engaged research considers socio-cultural ideas in meaningful practices.

Vygotskian and related theories were radical, in part, because they explained that human development is engagement in society. If they are to have radical implications, these ideas must be presented in terms of the nature and impact of their enactment in contemporary daily life and institutions. Rather than separate theory, method and practice, we scholars exploring such ideas must be doing so in practices embodying the ideas. Now over thirty years of research in the United States alone, and more elsewhere, has operationalized Vygotskian socio-cultural principles in empirical research published in journals, handbooks, edited volumes, and individually authored books. Those of us seeking to advance socio-cultural ideas must be practicing them in research examining the interaction of individuals and societies in situated and embodied ways. While this might sound obvious, I point out that much scholarship continues to remain in the realm of ideas, some offering illustrative case studies, some using techniques like interviewing which ask research subjects about phenomena, thus examining phenomena out of context. Four papers in this issue offer several common tenets linking psychology and society, the articles embody the tenets in complementary ways, and a few enact the tenets in praxis.

Engaged research samples and/or elicits meaning in diverse social relationships with discourses that involve diverse affordances. Because autobiography and personal experience narratives put the speaker up front as subject as well as author, engaged researchers assume that meanings in those genres emphasize only one kind of self-presentation, while the same speaker reflecting, for example, on a vignette of similar situations or sharing a story about other persons, would share different meanings. By shifting from first person narrative – “my story” – to third person or fictional narratives, the different semiotic affordances of those discursive genres become part of the shared meanings, adding complexity and nuance. Engaged research takes the semiotic media employed – used by individual research participants, broader social collectives, and researchers – seriously. Whether and how these semiotic systems are verbal, oral, written, visual, performative, and so on, is determined by the context of practice, the research questions, and the ways in which the affordances of the diverse semiotic media are also involved in co-construction of meaning, as we learn with the increasing prominence of “interplay” in Roychoudhury and Gardner’s study, and the re-defining of “children” and “work” in Lordelo’s study.

Researchers can/should learn by being embedding in those practices, rather than extracting subjects into research domains

The researcher can learn from being embedded in the cultural setting in question – not only in the scholarly culture. As a mutual subject of inquiry, our method must be more like Roychoudhury and Gardner’s, as the researchers are embedded in, and work with educators in the setting to design multiple diverse dialogical interlocutors – not only our own research questions. On this view, the researcher must be involved in meaning making where it occurs, not separately, and thus with detailed engagements and analyses from a broad range of practices sampled in principled ways. The engaged researcher should not only to be involved in the activities in question as much as possible but also must make his/her own questions and methods as transparent and available to scrutiny as those of the subjects of inquiry.

Engaged research increases the need for scientific inquiry.

Engaged research considering the interaction of personal and collective cultures and development must be rigorous. This means being involved in interventions and data analyses that allow participants across individual and diverse social scales of activity to participate discursively in relation to multiple purposes, with multiple others, and in diverse situations. Guided by principles of socio-cultural theory, I make this suggestion from numerous previous studies showing how within-person and person-in-relation studies offer insights that alter what appear to be neutral premises of social reproduction or self-construction. Central in this process is that the features of expressive media (plots, stylistic devices, dialect uses, etc.) are integrated in the meaning making process. I can not discuss these in detail in this commentary, but notable as a finding is that young people who have grown up during and after wars use first person autobiographical narrating to conform to present values, such as those of non-governmental organizations with whom they are participating (analyses of individuals' and organizations' narratives show this), while they use fictional narratives to express realities of the past, such as the nationalistic explanations of causes and consequences of the war, explanations they would not express elsewhere to their contemporaries (Daiute, 2010). In addition to being embedded in the community center activities, my colleagues and I learned from this study with 137 young people, across four countries separated by war, writing a variety of narratives, surveys of peers in the former adversary countries, and letters to public officials about developmental programs for youth in the post-war period that complex variability of experience and knowledge emerges across relational and semiotic contexts.

This requirement for broad rigorous research designs and analyses may seem ironic given an emphasis on qualitative inquiry. Nevertheless, the apparently straightforward claim that individuals and collectives are mutually constructing cultures requires such multi-dimensional designs. If, moreover, we want research to have an impact, it must be able to speak to, for example, educators who continue to ban recent history for fear that there will be chaos due to conflicting values. Studies show that young people carry multiple and conflicting values, so finding ways to address these maturely can advance youth development if not development of the broader society. While keeping diverse goals and interpretive perspectives open, this approach to research is consistent with the need for transparency to reveal interactive processes, tensions, diversities, and alternative developmental pathways.

Engaged research provides multiple-meaningful-diverse relational positions for expression.

Seeking intra-personal as well as inter-personal diversity in terms of social relational meanings is also important in engaged research, to acknowledge the fact that collectives tend to foster social reproduction of their values, practices, meanings and ideologies. Engaged research observes interventions allowing for the construction of shared and diverse meanings, that is, research and/or practice designs that address power relations in the context.

CONCLUSION

If culture is a varied and complex interaction of expressive media that individuals interact with, within, and beyond, persons in cultural praxis must be our focus, not only for theory but also for ongoing development of human cultures. Given the fast moving changes, conflicts, personal goals, and allegiances of contemporary lives globally, theory is only as good as the most recent analysis of problems, perspectives, and solutions that together create cultures. Consistent with the major principles of recent scholarship, reviewed briefly herein, engaged research to address contemporary challenges at the intersection of individual and societal development occurs directly in the situation of practices relevant and meaningful to the individual and institutional participants of interest. Researchers should embed themselves there (rather than, for example, isolate participants out of their daily activities to do interviews). Further, research interventions and analyses should make practices, a range of semiotic tools, and meanings available, as much as possible, across stakeholders.

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