

## Bridge-builder

[Stanton Wortham](#)

*The Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky, Volumes 3 and 4.* Marie J. Hall, trans., Robert W. Rieber, ed. xvii + 294 pp. Plenum Press, 1997. \$59.50.

Since it branched off from philosophy in the 19th century, psychology has had a troubled, dual nature. Some have envisioned another natural science, one that offers causal explanations for behavior. Others have envisioned a humanistic science, one that offers context-specific descriptions of meaningfulness in human experience. The first group reduces behavior to natural mechanisms. The second insists that humanity be described in intentional or spiritual terms. Writing in the 1920s and '30s, Lev Vygotsky claimed that this split within psychology had created a crisis because it had prevented the field from gaining wide acceptance like the natural sciences. Although progress has been made over the past 70 years, Vygotsky's description rings uncomfortably true today.

Psychology will not solve its problem, Vygotsky argued, by adopting either a naturalistic or a humanistic approach alone. He decried naturalistic explanations that reduced complex human accomplishments like self-consciousness, volition and reasoning to simple behavioral associations. He was even more critical of humanistic accounts that described higher human functions as immaterial forces that evaded scientific explanation. Vygotsky proposed instead to construct a thoroughly materialistic science that would nonetheless explain the most complex, apparently spiritual aspects of human life. This was an enormously ambitious project. Volumes 3 and 4 of the English translation of his *Collected Works* help reveal to the English-speaking world how close he came to accomplishing his goal.

Vygotsky has been considered an important theorist by mainstream American developmental psychologists for a couple of decades, and in recent years his cultural and historical approach to cognition has begun to influence other areas of the discipline. But until 10 years ago, only two short, heavily edited books were available in English. With the publication of the *Collected Works* series, most of Vygotsky's key writings are available in original form. The English Volume 3 was Volume 1 in the Russian edition. This volume reveals Vygotsky's powerful philosophical vision far more richly than previously translated materials. Vygotsky's prefaces to Russian translations of important books in psychology, and his long article, "The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology," show his extraordinary ability to uncover the limitations of others' implicit theoretical assumptions. The English Volume 4 (Russian Volume 3) contains essential papers on the development of higher mental functions, the area in which Vygotsky came closest to a successful account of what makes us human beings.

Against the behaviorists of his day, Vygotsky maintained that higher human capacities—like our responses to art and our deliberate, self-conscious reasoning and action—represent qualitative developmental leaps. All other materialist accounts to that point had explained thinking, feeling and intention in terms of basic physiological or associative

processes. Vygotsky was the first to offer an objective, materialist account that did not reduce higher human functions to physiological or associative mechanisms. His approach relied on two key concepts: holism and history. Vygotsky claimed that developmental leaps—like the ability to think using true concepts—happen when primitive abilities combine to form a new functional system. Abstract thought, for instance, emerges when thinking and speech combine. A child first speaks to communicate and thinks to solve concrete problems. Then the child combines the two functions and uses the generalizing power of more complex language as a tool for thought. Children learn to organize their thinking by grouping objects and ideas in linguistic categories. Thus, Vygotsky claimed, the higher capacity (of abstract thought) develops through the synthesis of more primitive functions (rudimentary thought and speech) into a complex whole. Volume 4 illustrates how Vygotsky's holistic, "interfunctional" approach can explain many other higher psychological capacities besides abstract thought. Volume 3 shows that Vygotsky intended this approach not only to answer questions about cognitive development but also as a method for turning psychology into a true science.

Vygotsky argued that the interfunctional systems that explain distinctively human capacities represent complex adaptations made by the species. He emphasized that these adaptations depend on cultural and historical advances, as well as on biological ones. Humans have been evolutionarily successful partly because they can develop and pass down cultural knowledge and tools. This means that the higher mental processes depend on systems that combine biological and cultural-historical aspects. This has important consequences for our view of humanity. According to Vygotsky, historical epoch and a person's social position integrally influence that person's higher psychological functions. Vygotsky found this idea socially progressive because it meant that lesser-functioning human beings could be helped if their cultural tools were improved.

Psychologists, he argued, should explore these natural and cultural components instead of ignoring or reducing them. Although Vygotsky himself did not provide adequate empirical support for this argument (his early death cut short his psychological career after only a decade), his work remains important. *The Collected Works* in English are particularly valuable because a broad and honest reading of Vygotsky challenges common assumptions about psychology. By building on Vygotsky's more promising insights, psychology might have a better chance of overcoming the divisions it still faces.