

CONSTRUCTING EXPERIENCE

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Conceptual Change from a Sociocultural Perspective: Some Snapshots from a Family Album of Resemblances

When I agreed to discuss this topic, I agreed foolishly. I was foolish not because the topic isn't important, not because I don't have anything to say on the topic, but because the topic rests on a morass of slippery terms in a complex borderland between psychology and sociology. This borderland we are now just starting to map out, following some eloquent hints by adventurers who in the early years of the Soviet experiment thought they were showing the way to new realms of consciousness within new social relations. The economic and political experiment went awry, perhaps was so misguided as to inevitably fail. But the inquiry into what it meant to be human acting within the changing conditions of historical society created a new standpoint for viewing and reflexively directing our higher order behaviors, the force of which we are just beginning to spell out. I was tempted to speak by the sharp contrast between two sets of images of conceptual change—images that identify where concepts reside and what it means that they change.

First, from a cognitive perspective, the issue of conceptual change is perceived as how an individual changes his or her mind, most often in an educational setting—that is, changing along desired developmental paths. The question is usually posed as a version of intellectual development and personal maturation. The individual is assumed to start from a stable conceptual or cognitive state that is then reorganized as part of internal growth processes, although perhaps instigated by or otherwise related to external stimuli. The knowledge or concepts that the student needs to contend with, assimilate, and grow into are assumed to be known and stable, either through a certain naturalness of the concepts (perhaps even biological determinism) or a lack of problematicization of the socially asserted concepts.

Conceptual change is usually of interest to education because we

want students to get new concepts or abandon what we consider inappropriate ones—that is, conceptual change is viewed from the position of the more educated, more adult, educators. We want students to be able to do things—analyze, evaluate, calculate—in ways they were previously unable to and in line with the general conceptual competences available in our society. Cognitive accounts are aimed at the incomplete cognition of the beginner, amateur, student. The only place that is taken as problematic is the space inside the head of the young. Cognitive accounts, therefore, are usually teleological. I do not discount this, because I am an educator. But I want to step outside of this, to think socioculturally for a moment.

The second view of conceptual change, a sociological one, is concerned with how an entire community or social collective changes a shared concept. The problem of conceptual change from this perspective is only secondarily one of individuals—how individuals are enlisted into, socialized into, become committed to the changing concept. Primarily, the concept is what is shared with others. The central problematics concern the processes by and consequences of changes in the communal representation or instantiation of the concept. The prototype of this approach to conceptual change might be thought to be an island community that changes its gods or social structure, or a scientific specialty coming to accept a new truth or a new set of relationships to other specialties and institutions. The elements examined as part of such conceptual change are usually such processes as negotiation, interests, public symbols, group identification, diffusion. Neither the individual's cognitive processing of the changing concept nor the individual's idiosyncratic interpretation of the concept within a personal meaning system are taken to be problematic, as the major concern is how the individual and the group come to orient themselves toward and commit themselves to the common conceptual representation. From this point of view, all concepts are equal, and education into new concepts becomes a process of socialization or indoctrination or accommodation or trading one set of concepts for another. The developmental teleology is gone, to be replaced with a group dynamic of integration, alienation, differentiation, or interaction.

Both these sets of imagery for thinking about conceptual change have led to revealing and persuasive research, mutually exclusive though they appear to be. However, they raise questions for each other. How are group orientations and representations enacted and elaborated in individual cognition and literate behavior? How are individual cognition and literate behavior played out upon the social field in creating

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social formations? Sociologists and psychologists wandered into this middle ground in the earlier part of the century before psychology and sociology divided up the human world definitively and institutionally. Although many people have been interested in this middle ground over the years, a variety of conceptual, methodological, and terminological distinctions have made it consistently hard to establish firm and stable footing, in what has been increasingly opened up as an abyss between two disciplines. Rather than repeat the genealogy of the attempts from Mead and Vygotsky to Giddens and Wertsch, almost all of which have been suggestive and useful but frustratingly evanescent, I would rather suggest one of the problems that keeps things evanescent—and suggest thereby how, when entering on this middle ground, we might identify the phenomena and units of analysis we attempt to create accounts of. My suggestions I believe derive directly from Vygotsky and stand as a testament to his prescient clarity. Sixty years ago, he offered solutions to problems we still do not have clearly in focus. The problem is that within this middle ground neither cognition nor society nor concepts have firm meaning or unproblematic existences. These seem to be practical achievements of the individuals acting symbolically with respect to each other, and our accounts of them seem to be reflexive achievements and resources for participants monitoring and managing their behaviors and for analysts creating accounts of those behaviors. Thus, the terms become slippery, as all achievements and resources are, when looked at within different occasions and for different purposes.

To make the problem clearer, let me give you some highly stylized and staged snapshots—perhaps you might think of them as cartoons—and ask you to consider where society, cognition, concepts, and conceptual change reside in each of them.

1a. An alert child sits in a high school social studies class. In discussing cold war politics, the teacher introduces the term *hegemony*. The introduction of the term allows the teacher to demonstrate a symmetry in behavior between the United States and the USSR in relation to hemispheric neighbors.

1b. The student writes in his notebook that the term *hegemony* means one country asserting power over another or a region. Moreover, he writes down that both the United States and the USSR acted hegemonically in the cold war period.

1c. The following day during a pop quiz, in response to appropriate questions, the student reproduces the statements from his notes.

In this first group of snapshots, the concept seems to be a term the teacher uses and about which this particular student can reproduce several sentences. The conceptual change seems to be the introduction of this term to the student. But the concept was also an operator in the teacher's original discussion, allowing him to advance his presentation of political history, and perhaps reorganizing the students' perceptions of the cold war. At this stage, however, we do not know what activity goes on in students' heads about the cold war or the United States and the USSR or how this has been changed by the introduction of the new term. All we know is the kinds of statements the students can produce. In terms of the classroom as a society, we do know that the students seem to accept the teacher's authority in determining what kinds of statements ought to be reproduced in ensuing discussions and on pop quizzes, but we know little more about the orientation toward or existence of a community or other form of collective among the people in the classroom, nor the students' affiliation with or commitment toward the concepts introduced by the teacher into that classroom.

2a. The alert student raises his hand and asks the teacher whether the term *hegemony* might apply to the behavior of Great Britain during the nineteenth century, which the class had studied last term. The teacher smiles warmly and says, "Certainly. Now you have the idea."

2b. Then the student points out some similarities between Victorian England's and the cold war United States' relations to neighbors, no longer explicitly using the term *hegemony*. The teacher smiles even more warmly, says, "Now you are thinking," and offers the boy a book he might want to read.

The concept no longer is a public term but seems to have become some kind of mental operator for the student, first as some kind of terminological template to compare to other phenomena of the same category (international relations of countries in time) and then as some internalized gestalt device for organizing and generating analogies. The conceptual change here is not the adding of a conceptual term but the expanded application of the term and then moving from a particular lexical association to reorganization of a larger semantic field. Here we have something going on that looks more like cognition, acknowledged by the teacher's comments and smiles. However, the recognized cognition is displayed in the form of the public recitation of novel statements, and the recognition of thinking is only in the imputation of what opera-

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tions must have been performed inside the student's head so as to produce those utterances. The social link that seems to be formed is local in terms of the teacher's increasing appreciation of the student's actions and the welcoming of the student into a special relationship over the shared valued activity of making novel claims about the international relations of large countries. The student, by continuing to orient to that activity basks in the warmth of the teacher's approvals and transforms himself into a "real scholar."

3a. The student goes home and is informed by his parents that he must spend the evening entertaining his least favorite cousin who has arrived from Cincinnati. Full of thoughts about the exertion of political power in international setting, the student is about to call his parents "wicked hegemonic overlords of the oppressed peoples of the region." But he quickly remembers the fate of subordinate countries that attempted to assert autonomy at the wrong moment, and he simply says, "Sure," while harboring a resentment.

3b. Now in the frame of mind of a captive nation, the student makes small talk with his cousin, finds that she has not been allowed by her parents to see an R-rated movie—and they conspire with a third older friend to rent the video. In making small talk with various parents, the cousins make coded allusions to their contraband video in ways not noticed by the parents, reaffirming a new bonding among the cousins. The word *hegemony* or the discussion of politics or even of relations with authoritarian parents never explicitly comes up between them.

As the concept moves around social settings and away from particular formulations and operations, it loses its specific meaning as concept and becomes part of a train of reorganizing perception, action, and social relations. Cognition, too, becomes of manifold kinds orienting toward a variety of behaviors that seem to have little to do with intellectual productions. The social groupings also become complex and contingent, sensitive to the new perceptions generated in the wake of the student's introduction to the political term *hegemony*. The Cincinnati cousin's social relations, perceptions of parents, actions, affects, and thinking (including reactions to and talk about the video) are also influenced by the first student's awareness of and operations with the term *hegemony*, even though she herself has never yet heard of the term.

4. The next day the student returns to class, which has now turned to discussion of how citizens of eastern Europe responded to Rus-

sian hegemony. He makes perceptive comments about the ways subject peoples apparently accept authority while subverting it and creating new affinities among themselves. The teacher is very happy and wonders what that student must have been reading the night before. Other members of the class for the first time see that hegemony is an interesting topic, and they start talking about how people they know get around "the system." Now the teacher is really happy and starts thinking that he might put in for best teacher award.

The relevant social groups keep shifting and reforming. The concept moves back into its original forum and form as a lexical item in international politics, but with changed import and application created through a perceptual-experiential mood the student now carries with him into the classroom. Change occurs in other students' orientation toward the term and in the first student's attributions—and in the teacher's feeling about how well and what the term communicates to students. Cognition is again manifested in talk, but the operations and associations that produced the talk become much more idiosyncratic and difficult to impute with any accuracy.

What you have in all these cases are individuals acting with some orientation toward what they perceive as social fields so as to create their participation in unfolding events. Their internalized behavior is integrated with their external symbolic behavior and the symbols that behavior employs or responds to. Their symbolic behavior, internal and external, is reorganized around their perceived experience and perceived unfolding of events. They orient their attention and behavior as they change their perceptions of needs and opportunities and resources available in the social field and as they change their perception of the force of symbolic items and interactions that produce the social relations. You have people inhabiting terms as they seem useful to them for their aims, and then those inhabited terms becoming a habitat for action. You have society being produced and reproduced in ways constituted by the changing symbolic behaviors of the parties, which are influenced by the external and internalized symbolic operations as well as the spontaneous unreflective behaviors carried out by the various parties. You also have social and psychological meanings being attributed to the behavior of various parties by other parties.

So the problem remains of how you get robust and stable enough accounts of symbolic behavior that will enable us to identify the kinds of social and cognitive growth we want to foster in those who are placed in our hands for education—being aware that society, cognition,

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and growth are all accomplishments created through symbolic activities. Then as educators we need to identify the activities that would foster those growths and to identify which activities on our parts will enable the desired student activities. Finally, as members of a profession, we need to identify which professional, knowledge-making, concept-forming, profession-forming, and experience-shaping activities we ought to partake of to enable our profession to enact itself in ways we would smile upon.