

Vygotsky's theory of method and philosophy of practice: implications for trans/formative methodology

*Teoria do método e filosofia da prática de Vygotsky:
implicações para metodologia trans/formativa*

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implicaciones para metodología trans/formativa*

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ABSTRACT

Vygotsky's project needs to be grasped as a yet unnamed type of an approach which, in continuing the revolutionary spirit of Marxism, moved beyond the old divide between theory and practice and instead, embodied their *unity* in a peculiar blend with distinct philosophical, theoretical and ethical/ideological underpinnings. The goal of creating new psychology for a society that itself needed to be created on principles of social justice and equality guided this approach and turned it into a *critical-practical project of social transformation and change*. The main argument advanced in this paper is that at the core of Vygotsky's method is the novel transformative onto-epistemology, coupled with the socio-political ethos of equality and justice, which challenge ideology of adaptation and control. I discuss this set of issues in light of a transformative activist stance that puts premium on researchers' commitments and value orientations.

Keywords: Vygotsky. Transformative activist stance. Social justice. Ideological-political work. Formative method.

RESUMO

O projeto de Vygotsky precisa ser compreendido como um tipo ainda sem nome de uma abordagem que, ao continuar o espírito revolucionário do marxismo, mudou-se para além da velha divisão entre teoria e prática e, ao invés disso, consubstancia sua *unidade* em uma mistura peculiar com distintos aportes filosóficos, teóricos e éticos e suportes ideológicos. O objetivo de criar uma nova psicologia para uma sociedade que necessitava de princípios orientados para justiça social e igualdade transformou esta abordagem em um *projeto crítico-prático de transformação social e de mudança*. O principal argumento em que este trabalho avança é que o cerne do método de Vygotsky é a transformação onto-epistemológica, juntamente com a ética sócio-política de igualdade e justiça, que desafiam a ideologia de adaptação e controle. Eu discuto este conjunto de questões à luz de uma postura ativista de transformação que ilumina sobre os compromissos dos pesquisadores e orientações de valor.

Palavras-chave: Vygotsky. Postura ativista transformadora. Justiça social. Trabalho político-ideológico. Método formativo.

RESUMEN

El proyecto de Vygotsky necesita ser comprendido como un tipo aún sin nombre de un enfoque que, en la continuación del espíritu revolucionario del marxismo, fue más allá de la antigua división entre la teoría y la práctica y, en cambio, plasmado su *unidad* en una peculiar mezcla con distinta filosófico, teórico y ético / sustento ideológico. El objetivo de crear nueva psicología para una sociedad que sí era necesario crear en los principios de la justicia social y la igualdad guiada este enfoque y lo convirtió en un *proyecto crítico-práctico de transformación social y el cambio*. El principal argumento en este trabajo es que en el núcleo del método de Vygotsky es la novela transformador en-epistemología, junto con la ética socio-política de la igualdad y la justicia, que desafían la ideología de adaptación y de control. Discuto esta serie de cuestiones a la luz de una postura activista transformador que pone prima sobre los compromisos de los investigadores y las orientaciones de valor.

Palabras clave: Vygotsky. Postura activista transformadora. La justicia social. El trabajo político-ideológico. El método de formación.

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INTRODUCTION

In a powerful statement, Fredric Jameson (2006) expresses the need “to grasp Marxism as something rather different than a philosophical system... , *an as yet unnamed conceptual species* one can only call a ‘unity of theory and practice,’ which by its very nature and structure *stubbornly resists assimilation to the older philosophical ‘system’* as such” (p. xiii; emphasis added). In sharing this view, I suggest that it would be fairly accurate to say that Vygotsky’s project, too, needs to be grasped as a yet unnamed type of an approach which, in inheriting the revolutionary spirit of Marxism, moved beyond the old divide between theory and practice and instead, embodied their *unity* in a peculiar blend with distinct philosophical and theoretical underpinnings. The resulting approach radically departed from the traditional canons of positivist, objectivist, and empiricist science. In particular, Vygotsky’s project can be seen as laying grounds for a novel type of psychology with a new mission devoted not to a pursuit of knowledge per se but to creating knowledge as part and parcel of a larger-scale, revolutionary social transformation that self-consciously commits and contributes to creating new forms of social life and practices based in principles of social justice and equality. It is this politically and ideologically non-neutral, historical and ultimately practical undertaking, stretching far beyond the confines of science as an Ivory tower enterprise, that gave rise to Vygotsky’s works and itself became enriched by them. The goal of creating new psychology for a society that itself needed to be created on principles of social justice and equality guided this project and turned it into a *critical-practical instrument of social transformation and change*. This goal defined each and all of this project’s constitutive elements—its research questions and goals, its epistemology and criteria of knowledge justification, its concepts and methodology. In the latter aspect, it is precisely the formative-constructive, intervention-type—or trans/formative, as suggested herein—method that played the role of a constitutive dimension of Vygotsky’s project. In carrying out this project of social transformation, in a direct link with agentively creating new radical alternatives in the conditions and practices that ground social existence such as, and especially, in the practices of education, its participants produced knowledge of a radical sort.

Given this novelty and originality, very much is at stake in how we understand and implement Vygotsky’s theory and method. It takes much conceptual and theoretical effort and analysis to articulate, explicate, and justify this approach (while also critically re-assessing some of its gaps and contradictions) so that it can be advanced, gain wider recognition, and find more implementation

across various fields and subject domains than has been achieved so far. While attempting this kind of analysis, this paper joins debates on the intervention-type method (e.g., SANNINO & SUTTER, 2011). The main argument here is that at the core of Vygotsky’s method is the novel transformative ontology and epistemology, coupled with the socio-political ethos of equality and justice which challenge ideology of adaptation and control. I also draw attention to some of the precursors to the current debates that were developed within Vygotsky’s project in Russia especially between the 1960s and 1990s. I address what appears to be the most contested issue in this approach—how to theorize and account for researchers’ agency and commitments in conducting research in line with the trans/formative methodology.

My central claim is that Vygotsky’s project can be interpreted as taking up the challenge to formulate an alternative to *both* the “objective” model of science that takes knowledge to be a mirror-reflection of reality and naïvely believes in “raw” facts disconnected from human practices on one hand, and to postmodernist relativism with its uncommitted stance regarding broad ontological questions and values, and its self-defeating skepticism associated with “a profound allergy to truth claims” (HARAWAY, cited in EISENHART, 2001, p. 20), on the other. Such a challenge was an enormously difficult undertaking and, not surprisingly, it has not been finalized by Vygotsky and his colleagues. Yet the groundwork that they had laid is of great value and can be creatively and critically expanded especially in line with an orientation towards social change. In particular, this project offered an outline for a model of science and research as transformative practical endeavors of an activist nature infused with ideology, ethics and politics that take the vision for egalitarian society and a commitment to achieving it as the core grounding for method, theory, and practice of research. I discuss this set of issues in light of the trans/formative onto-epistemology and activist stance that put premium on researchers’ commitments and value orientations.

METHODOLOGY AS THE PHILOSOPHY OF METHOD

One of the hallmarks of Vygotsky’s project is that at the deeply seated level of its philosophical underpinnings it challenged the ethos of adaptation and associated premises of passivity, inborn inequality, and social control. In other words, it challenged the core of the whole ideology that underpinned the workings of social sciences as they developed in capitalist societies. In place of this ethos, Vygotsky offered an outline of human development grounded in dialectical and materialistic conception of

humanity underpinned by the ethos of solidarity and equality. It is in this context, I suggest, that his trans/formative methodology is situated.

As is well known, Vygotsky paid great attention to the problem of method. He did so throughout his works and especially in discussing broad topics related to the crisis in psychology and while situating this crisis within the debates about relationships between theory and practice. As he wrote in one of his explicitly philosophical work, *The Historical Significance of the Crisis in Psychology: A Methodological Investigation* (1997a), “Anyone who attempts to skip this problem, to jump over methodology in order to build some special psychological science right away, will inevitably jump over his horse while trying to sit on it” (p. 329). One might be tempted to think that these words is a call to develop methods of empirical investigation. However, Vygotsky is talking about something much broader in scope—the notion of methodology as, in his expression, the *philosophy of practice*. In discussing this notion, Vygotsky echoes the epigraph that he chose to open this work with—“the principle and *philosophy of practice* is—once again—the stone which the builders rejected and which became the head stone of the corner” (ibid., p. 306). He clarifies that “method’ means ‘way,’ [and] we further view it as a means of knowledge acquisition. But in all points the way is determined by the goal to which it leads” (ibid).

This broad usage of the term *methodology* is consistent with how it has been traditionally employed in Russian philosophy and social sciences. To illustrate from contemporary works in this tradition, methodology is “a system of principles and ways of organizing and constructing theoretical and practical activities, as well as a theory of this system” (Iljichev, 1983, p. 365). The intricacies of the notion of methodology have been discussed in Stetsenko (1990) with this work later included in textbooks on methodology of psychology (e.g., Lubovskij, 2007). This usage is akin to philosophy of science and science studies in the western academic tradition. Vygotsky’s point in drawing attention to methodology is to critique empiricist-positivist models which understand science as a straightforward process of accumulating and gathering facts and data. His critique is aimed at Piaget, whose works are “a virtual ocean of facts” that are gushing from the pages, as Vygotsky puts it. Indeed, Piaget made an explicit attempt to deal with direct, “raw” facts in developing his theory as expressed in his own statement that “all I have attempted has been to follow step by step the facts as given in the experiments” (quoted in VYGOTSKY, 1987, p. 55). While giving credit to Piaget for his important discoveries, Vygotsky nonetheless faults him for thinking that facts exist on their own and can be described or accepted somehow as they

are: “Piaget attempted to hide behind a protective high wall of facts. But the facts have cheated and betrayed him. ... But the one who *considers facts, inevitably considers them in the light of one theory or another*. Facts and philosophy are inextricably intertwined... If one wants to find the key to this rich collection of new facts, one must first of all uncover *the philosophy of the fact*, how it is obtained and made sense of. Without this, the facts will remain mute and dead” (ibid.).

What Vygotsky asserts in place of empiricist models of science is, first, the principle of underdetermination of scientific data—the position later discussed in philosophy of science by Karl Popper and in postpositivist educational research (PHILLIPS & BURBULES, 2000). According to it, facts are theory-laden, contingent on theoretical assertions, and shot-through with values. Second, Vygotsky speaks not just of methodology of science but of *methodology, or philosophy, of practice*. This expression is non-traditional, counter-intuitive, and even questionable from the point of view of not only empiricist and positivist models but also of postpositivist ones which might agree with Vygotsky on the previous point yet here part ways with his position.

In positing philosophy of practice as the pathway and model for “doing” science, Vygotsky is suggesting to overcome, in truly radical ways, the traditional separation between theory and practice that had permeated sciences from their inception. What is a philosophy of practice? In my view, in using this term, Vygotsky is introducing his trans/formative methodology as a meta-level principle at the pinnacle of his whole project inclusive of both theoretical premises and investigative methods (the latter implying the traditional connotation of “method”). This stance is not about adding practice to theory as is common in many appeals to apply theoretical ideas in practice. Neither is it only about verifying theoretical ideas in practice, as is commonly asserted within the Marxist tradition and in many forms of pragmatism. Rather, in Vygotsky’s approach, which is radical even by today’s standards, at stake is a novel project as an as yet unnamed conceptual species. Indeed, according to Vygotsky (1997a), “...practice enters the deepest foundations in the workings of science and reforms it *from beginning to end*; practice sets the tasks and serves as the supreme judge of theory, as its truth criterion; it dictates how to construct the concepts and how to formulate the laws” (p. 305-306).

Establishing such a strong connection between theory, research, philosophy, and practice bears resemblance with contemporary research orientations such as “praxis research,” “phronetic research,” “praxis-related research,” and philosophy of practice (cf. KEMMIS, 2010). At stake in such approaches, in Toulmin’s (1988) words, is the recovery of practical philosophy which

moves the primary locus of ethical-philosophical debates into practical contexts. For example, the primary locus of the mind/body problem lies in the realm of psychiatric practice; that of problems about causality, rationality, and responsibility—in criminal courts. What needs to be added to this, I suggest, is that the locus of studying development belongs into classrooms, afterschool settings, daycare centers, and other educational contexts. This is in acknowledgment that educational practices necessarily generate and, moreover, constitute philosophical problems and also serve as the grounds on which these problems can be addressed, suggesting bi-directional links between theory (and philosophy that underpins it) and practice.

What is at stake, in my view, is an uninterrupted continuum of ‘*practice-theory-practice*’ cycles in which ideas/concepts and actions, forms of knowing and doing, words and deeds belong together in an inseparable blend. This blend is constituted by *one and the same reality* of human praxis albeit in its varied facets and dimensions. Importantly, praxis is understood in its human relevance—as a process of people producing their life through material expenditure of efforts and creation of resources that is constitutive of the human development and the reality in which it unfolds. The cycles of praxis include multi-directional movements through and among the layers of ideology, broad meta-theory (worldview), theoretical concepts, methods, and practice. One of the most crucial (and often misunderstood) points is that the layers and dimensions in the cycle of praxis dialectically interpenetrate so that each layer is present in all others while all others are present in each one—in a dialectical mutual embedding and dialectical expansion in a spiral of knowing-being-doing that constitutes one composite and unified continuous flow of praxis. Thus, for example, the famous dictum by Kurt Lewin that there is nothing more practical than a good theory has to be expanded by, and appreciated simultaneously with, the notion that *there is nothing more theoretical than a good practice*—with both dimensions interpenetrating, presupposing, interlocking, mutually supporting, and bi-directionally infusing each other, essentially blending into one composite, non-additive reality (though in shifting balances of varied dimensions). This simultaneous appreciation of the theoretical value of practice and the practical value of theory highlights the real (not just proclaimed) interpenetration of theory and practice. Implications from this position, including the ineluctable saturation of knowledge with ideology/ethics, politics, and practical concerns—and the reciprocal saturation of practice with ideology and knowledge including of the most abstract sort (such as worldview level assumptions)—are discussed in the next section.

THE INTERVENTIONAL METHOD AS AN EMBODIMENT OF TRANSFORMATIVE ONTO-EPISTEMOLOGY

What unites all the dimensions of human praxis, including action and thought, words and deeds, theory and practice, knowledge and method, as I suggest in continuation of Vygotsky's position, is the overarching transformative stance. That is, they can be drawn together based in the key onto-epistemological stance that human development is grounded in, and constituted by, the specifically *transformative* collaborative practices aimed at changing the world. This position is in continuation of Marx's legacy as expressed in his famous thesis that “[p]hilosophers have so far only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it” (1978, p. 145). The actively transformative, nonadaptive character of human development was later highlighted by a number of Russian scholars working within Vygotsky's project and can be regarded as one of the hallmarks of Marxist psychology in general (for details, see STETSENKO, 2005; STETSENKO & ARIEVITCH, 2010). It has also been addressed by several western scholars building off from Vygotsky's ideas such as Engeström (2005) and Newman and Hozman (1993). However, this principle needs to be further analyzed and expanded especially in conceptualizing human development and methodology.

The onto-epistemological status and significance of transformative social practices, as well as profound implications of this position for practically all aspects in theorizing human development and social life, need to be more fully explored and absorbed, avoiding the coupling of this radical premise, as is often the case, with the old-fashioned ideas and views. This kind of exploration has been carried out in a series of publications by the present author in advancing what has been termed *the transformative activist stance* (TAS, see STETSENKO, 2008, 2010, 2011, 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016; for applications, see SAWCHUK & STETSENKO, 2008; VIANNA, HOUGAARD, & STETSENKO, 2014; VIANNA & STETSENKO, 2006, 2011). This work in part overlaps with several newly emerging philosophical directions including new materialism, feminist materialism, critical pedagogy, and participatory and dialogical approaches, among others. Above all, this approach builds on Vygotsky's nontraditional model of science that eschewed a moral order of disinterestedness and distance central to the so-called “objective experimentation” (MORAWSKI, 2012). Instead of copying reality and striving to disclose it “as it is,” this model called for actively and intentionally creating artificial conditions to co-construct the very processes and phenomena under investigation in order *to study them in the acts of co-construction including via*

cultural mediation. The radical crux of this approach was captured by Leontiev, as conveyed by Bronfenbrenner (1977), a scholar directly and profoundly influenced by Vygotsky's project, in concluding remarks of his influential work, "It seems to me that American researchers are constantly seeking to explain how the child came to be what she is; we [however] ... are striving to discover not how the child came to be what she is, but *how she can become what she not yet is*" (p. 528; emphasis added; with slight emendations).

Instead of appealing to the objectivist maxim that methods should strive to mirror reality as closely and as faithfully as possible (as per traditional positivist canons), Vygotsky argued that "the strength of the experiment is in its *artificiality*" (1997a, p. 320). The researcher, according to Vygotsky, instead of striving to copy reality, should actively and consciously create conditions (by necessity, artificial) that permit to construct and generate the objects of investigation *in the processes* of studying and changing them. This method moved beyond the limits not only of the classical experimental paradigm but of the whole ideology of descriptivist methods coupled with contemplative stance and speculative metaphysics. The staple of Vygotsky's method is an active co-construction of investigative situation including the very objects of investigation, with pedagogical intervention representing its paradigmatic form—such as in teaching-learning experiments where the learner is provided with the tools necessary to solve problems in collaboration with others.

In other words, Vygotsky set to explore the course of human development not "as it is," in its status quo, as a presumably natural process but instead, through aiding, amplifying, and de facto co-creating it via cultural tools and other forms of mediation. These considerations ensued from and formed the basis for Vygotsky's concept of the zone of proximal development and the method of "double stimulation" which combined experiment, observation, and teaching intervention in one unified procedure (note that its designation as "double stimulation" might be outdated due to undesirable behaviorist connotations of the term "stimulation"). Therefore, he called his approach "genetic" (and sometimes instrumental)—to emphasize its contrast with the traditional experiment that taps into behavioral outcomes instead of addressing the very process in which psychological phenomena are co-constructed and co-produced.

Vygotsky's followers, most notably Galperin (1989) and Davydov (1990), focused their efforts on specifying and further expanding ideas about relationships between theory and practice while addressing bi-directional links between teaching-learning and development (for details, see ARIEVITCH & STETSENKO, 2000; STETSENKO & ARIEVITCH, 2002; STETSENKO & VIANNA, 2009).

In this approach, "the very formulation of the traditional question of what the psychological processes such as self, personality, and cognition are like has been changed into the question of how these processes are possible, what are the conditions *sine qua non* that create (construct) them, that make them both possible and necessary" (STETSENKO & ARIEVITCH, 1997, p. 165). In this work, "the method of active co-construction has been granted priority and a special epistemological status" (ibid.). It is "through actively changing, constructing the psychological phenomena, that their essence can be grasped and their development understood. 'Understanding through constructing, through changing'—this has become an epistemological motto beyond the concrete empirical research conducted in the post-Vygotskian framework" (ibid.). The psychological research of this type represented a form of practical engagement with educational practice in which disciplinary theoretical and conceptual tools were deployed in a *morally grounded* search for better practices of education *premised on ideals of equality*—that all children can learn if provided with access to requisite cultural tools and mediations.

The scholars of this direction thus stepped beyond the boundaries of psychology understood in a traditional way as a value-neutral endeavor that can be developed and advanced over and above, and prior to, educational practice. Instead, their research and inquiries were coupled with, and carried out, via active educational intervention steeped in a political commitment to seeing all children as equally (though not similarly) "endowed" to be successful learners while creating conditions for their success. That is, the far from neutral goal of education as a praxis that should support development of *all* children, on one hand, and the goal of understanding and theorizing development, on the other, were essentially blended into one pursuit.

Remarkable were also works by Meshcheryakov (1979) that engaged children with disabilities in culturally mediated, and initially practical-material, shared activities with others. The underlying approach contrasted with traditional "deficit model" of disability with its claims that the solitary processing of information is the motor of development and that inborn "defects" cannot be remedied through social engagement and mediation. In contrast, this research was infused with the optimistic and deeply egalitarian belief that all children, any disabilities notwithstanding, can be initiated—if provided with the requisite cultural tools for acting—into successful social participation not constrained by any preset limitations of a biological nature.

It can be said that the radical notion of equality, in Vygotsky's project, is used in a dual way, serving as both a presupposition for, and a product of, theory-building and research. On the one hand, this notion is derived

from an ethical-political commitment to social equality taken as *an ideal* that is underwriting and guiding theory and research. On the other hand, it is arrived at in the course of a systematic study into human development and concepts that describe it. This approach does not take the ideal of equality as an abstract notion to be tested in some detached and neutral way. Instead, it *takes a stand* on and commits to matters of equality as the first analytical step that leads all other methodological strategies, conceptual turns, and theoretical choices and thus, attempts to *realize equality* in the process of theory- and knowledge-building. In other words, this is about undertaking efforts to provide conditions for *making this assumption true*, including at the level of supportive theoretical constructions, as one of the steps in the overall project of creating equality in education (for a related though not identical view, see RANCIÈRE, 1991).

This approach can also be seen to centrally build on Vygotsky's notion that the methods and the objects of investigation are always intimately linked with one another, whereby they are not ontologically separate but instead, *indivisibly merged* (VYGOTSKY, 1997b). In my interpretation, this position implies that methodological tools, strategies, and techniques have to be tailored to, and to result, not in the uncovering of facts "as they are" at the present moment and within the givenness of the status quo. Rather, it implies intervening with and co-constructing phenomena and processes which we investigate in non-neutral, historically determinate ways in line with the ontological, epistemological and ideological commitments and goals that the researchers deem worthy and take on as guides for action.

Many works by Russian scholars within Vygotsky's tradition expanded on his insights. For example, Puzyrej (2007; original works date to 1980-1990s) has elaborated on the notion that human development is an artificial process that can be captured only under conditions of active engagement in the co-construction of this very process and while deploying special mediating devices (*lovushki*). The works by the author of the present article in the 1990s highlighted, in the same vein, the need to radically re-orient psychology away from a contemplative stance while devising a new conceptual apparatus along the lines of an active and even activist enterprise—a discipline with a unique status that is bridging the gap between theory and practice and gives up the notion that knowledge can be achieved in an abstract contemplation outside of active engagement with what it strives to study and understand. This proposal focused on viewing objects of investigation and knowledge claims as produced by and enmeshed with the valuational and goal-directed investigative practices. Moreover, "positing psychology as a science of a constructive [i.e., non-contemplative] type

means that in explorations of psychological processes, mere observation conducted outside of concrete goals of transforming and guiding these processes, turns out to have no scientific value" (STETSENKO, 1990, p. 48; insert added).

Another direction developed by researchers within Vygotsky's school focused on switching from a position of "absolute and neutral observer" towards the "participatory positioning in being," so that the researcher is willing to take the risk of including oneself "inside" the realm that is being investigated (VASILYUK, 1988). Bratus (1989) insisted that psychology needs to address processes through which human subjectivity comes into being, rather than concern itself with ready-made outcomes of these processes.

The pioneering work in Vygotsky's project predated many later developments such as in critical pedagogy and other directions that took Marxism as their guiding principle (e.g., by Paulo Freire). It has also predated developments in action research including Kurt Lewin's favoring of field experiments rather than those confined to the laboratory walls and his insistence that action research experiment must not only express theory but do so in such a way that the results of the experiment can be fed directly back to the theory (cf. GUSTAVSEN, 2001).

Methodologically, in contrast with many approaches that till today remain stalled between the two extremes of naïve positivism on one hand, and an uncommitted, laissez-faire relativism on the other, Vygotsky's project presented a viable alternative linked to the critical-humanistic, liberatory, and activist tradition. This position entailed that science and knowledge it produces depend on cultural contexts, social discourses and their histories, and politics/ideologies. Importantly, however, instead of focusing on these contingencies and seeking to de-construct knowledge claims as the ultimate goal of scholarship (though such a goal was by no means rejected), Vygotsky's project charted an alternative path that consisted in devising foundations for a new type of research carried out in the form of social praxis grounded in a vision—and a deeply ideological one at that—of a possible better world based in ideals of social justice and equity. The set of ideas developed in Vygotsky's project is best viewed as an outline for renewal of society, especially education, rather than an abstract corpus of theoretical principles and ideas.

To emphasize again, what lies beneath these claims and this methodology is a deeper seated layer—the layer of commitment and vision for a better future which are ineluctably social, moral, and political at once. That is, Vygotsky's method of theory and theory of method are based in an irrevocable commitment to social equality and justice, to the task of building a new psychology for

a society in which people have equal rights especially with regards to equal access to education, social supports and cultural mediations. This broad political ethos countered principles of adaptation and competition for resources as the core grounding for human development that takes the “givenness” of the world for granted and assumes that individuals have to fit in with its status quo.

This approach aligns with the tradition in social sciences and philosophy that link understandings of human development with value-laden conceptions about self and society. All major ideas and principles developed in this project including its concept of human nature and mind were value-laden tools infused with a desire to empower subordinate groups—especially through education—across divisions of social class, ethnicity, gender, and disability. Vygotsky’s work and knowledge it produced were part and parcel of the practical, and simultaneously deeply ideological and political, project that came out of drama of life, not of ideas only, and that also returned to life to transform it. This knowledge was a product, and simultaneously a vehicle, of their collaborative practical engagements with a unique socio-historical context that presented them with an unprecedented challenge—and opportunity—to devise a new system of psychology *in parallel with creating a new society itself*.

COMMITMENTS AND END-POINTS IN TRANS/FORMATIVE METHODOLOGY

A non-neutral, activist approach implied in research with the trans-formative methodology underpinned by social agendas clashes with many centuries-old notions about how to do science. Many educational scholars accept that “value commitments are woven into the fabric of investigations of what works, however infrequently they may be identified or carefully examined” (HOWE, 2009, p. 431). Yet one of the challenges is that insofar as researchers do so, they face accusations of ideological partiality considered to be incompatible with traditionally understood “objective” science. Indeed, discussions of these issues are still ridden with anxiety that taking a stance beyond instrumental goals may lead to partisan politics and master narratives. To avoid these undesirable connotations and implications, the notions of activist commitment and of endpoints in their relevance to research methodology need to be addressed.

Similar to other critical and participatory perspectives, TAS features human development as embedded in and contingent on relations with and participation in stratified social practices infused with power dynamics. However, in integrating the notions of social change and activism

into the most basic groundings of onto-epistemology, TAS breaks more radically with the notions of a static world and adaptation to the status quo. From the TAS position, persons are agents of social practices who come into being as unique individuals through their activist deeds, that is, through and to the extent that they take a stand on matters of social significance and commit to making a difference by contributing to changes in the ongoing social practices. This means that there is no way that we can extract ourselves from activist engagements; we can never take a neutral stance of disinterested observers uninvolved in what is going on. A human being who, in order to be and to know, needs to act in the *social world that is constantly changing* and, moreover, that is *changing through one’s own deeds*, cannot be neutral or uncertain because such acting—unlike reacting or passively dwelling—presupposes knowing what is right or wrong, what to do next, and which direction one wants and needs to go.

Taking activist forms of being, doing, and knowing *in place of adaption* resolutely debunks connotations associated with the ideology of control and submission. This opens ways to overcome the disguised ideology of political quietism that perpetuates existing injustices. In this emphasis, TAS provides strong warrants and legitimation for research that aims to challenge social hierarchies and hegemonic agendas by self-consciously intervening into the status quo. TAS suggests that it is *only* on the grounds of and from within an activist agenda that any knowing, including through conducting research, is possible in principle. All human beings, researchers not excluded, by virtue of being human, always *de facto* act from within their agendas and visions for the future. It is impossible to avoid drawing on our commitments that are ineluctably embodied in every act of doing and knowing. This grounding of knowledge and research in activist actions is seen in TAS not as a limitation but instead, as the necessary condition that provides firm anchors for conducting research. These anchors include the requirement that the warrants for knowledge claims be based on certain criteria, such as whether knowledge provides conditions for forms of life and social organization consistent with the ideological commitments that researchers take on. Instead of being subjective, such an approach in fact allows for “strong objectivity” (HARDING, 2004). In addition, TAS insists on exposing ideological-political underpinnings of research so as to make them *open to contestation and objection by others* (note the etymological similarity between “objection” and “objectivity”), rather than leaving these hidden under disguise of a traditional value neutrality.

A strong s/objective Foundation for knowledge, therefore, is sought in clearly defining its practical

relevance within always non-neutral pursuits of intervening into the status quo. This conclusion not only elevates the demand that researchers declare their values, goals, and commitments, but also urges that these are used as the core grounding for research design and methods. The cornerstone of this research model is formed by commitment to social transformation that uniquely positions researchers to see *what is* through the prism of how the present situations and conditions *came to be*, and also in light of *what ought to be*. In this, the historicity and situativity of knowledge is ascertained alongside its future orientation, thus overcoming the infamous “is-ought” dichotomy.

One important caveat is that these processes are neither fixed nor static. On the contrary, adopting endpoints is a process that is always shifting and changing because it is embedded in the constantly changing and dynamic *flux* of collaborative practices. That is, commitments, stands, and agendas are always in the process of coming about, requiring continuous renewal and contestation in constant reflection and dialogue with others, while facing up to the new challenges that arise every step of the way. Therefore, the danger is not in taking a stand and making a commitment. Instead, the danger is in taking these to be finite and unchanging and in neglecting open dialogues with others who have different visions and commitments. That is, the danger is in elevating one's own agenda as a rigidly pre-established dogma not amenable to change, instead of exposing and critically interrogating it, all while negotiating points of agreements and conflicts with others.

Consistent with standpoint epistemology, knowledge and expertise of participants, especially from disadvantaged populations, are elevated as invaluable sources of insights into the present conflicts and contradictions, thus prioritizing participants' voices. Yet TAS also calls upon *all* participating sides to critically interrogate and step beyond the presently given circumstances, and their own views, in order to collectively reveal contradictions, imagine a better future and devise projects that may bring this future into reality, together with participants. In this emphasis, TAS insists that research not only inevitably intervenes into the status quo but that it also needs to be *directly, explicitly, and self-critically designed to intervene into the status quo*, which can only be done based on an activist commitment to changing it in particular directions (see VIANNA & STETSENKO, 2014).

All of the above suggests that researchers and participants act as collaborative change agents, or *activists*, rather than observers or interpreters of reality. However, researchers' initial commitments are not fully characterized, nor completely sufficient in advance of research. Instead, they need to be explored

and expanded in collaboration with participants and constantly updated in light of unfolding dynamics instigated in and by research. The working out of a common vision/endpoint and agenda for social change through research is its most critical component. Due to research *always* intervening into and disrupting the status quo, its social risks, costs, and benefits need to be examined and continuously negotiated every step of the way. Research *also* entails turning personal engagement into a research tool, thus bringing in dimensions of personal responsibility and vulnerability and rendering research a simultaneously personal, political, and conceptual endeavor. Research inevitably taps into and disrupts, already through its “mere” presence, the status quo at research sites. The interventionist and “disruptive” nature of research is expounded and magnified, rather than only acknowledged and accepted. Clearly taking sides within these power dynamics is, therefore, not only inevitable, but also necessary and ultimately beneficial, whereas a neutral stance is not an option.

CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, Vygotsky's project was launched not with the exclusively positivist goal to provide a naturalistic account of human development based on a “view from nowhere.” Instead, its paramount (though not directly explicated) goal can be seen as that of overcoming the separation between the narrowly understood natural science, on one hand, and the ideological-critical orientation and emancipatory action, on the other. In this work, theory and method were developed in close (though implicit) alliance with ideology, ethics, and politics of social justice and equality in order to make possible a practical intervention into the course of history and human development as the pathway to social change and a better future. In furthering this project, the transformative activist stance suggests that research situations, just as the world itself, are a historically constituted and constantly changing *work-in-progress* collectively realized through collaborative activities and unique contributions by *all* participants. These situations are therefore infused with conflicting issues of power and values, and thus contingent, contested, and amenable to change. Articulating one's commitments is an inevitably central dimension of research. In the words of Molefi Kete Asante (2015), “one must claim space or take space, intellectually or physically, in any situation however difficult and dire it may seem,” while always “being on the side of fighting for transformation in the society,” on the side of those who are most subjected to injustices and exploitation.

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