

Sociocultural Theory

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WHAT'S COVERED

In this lesson, we'll discuss a big, all-encompassing psychological theory regarding the social, linguistic, and cognitive development of children.

The specific areas of focus include:

1. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory
2. Social Learning Theory
 - a. Zone of Proximal Development
 - b. Role of Language

1. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural theory was founded by Lev Vygotsky, who was a Soviet psychologist around the early 1900s.

He worked with some general obscurity at first; not many people knew about him, especially in the U.S. and the West due to the Iron Curtain of the Soviet Union, which didn't let a lot of this information out. However, even in his own country, he was criticized by many of his fellow Soviets. His ideas tended to be radical in their eyes, particularly in the field of psychology.

It wasn't until later that his ideas were rediscovered in the U.S. and the West, and they're now considered very influential, especially in educational theories of learning.

The sociocultural theory first stated that a person's cognitive development was dependent on the culture, tools, and languages that the people around that person used. Essentially, you need to view people in context; you can't separate them from their environment, or try to understand their development without first looking at the world around them.

This is because different cultures might have different kinds of goals or values that they want people to learn over time. This can even be true throughout history.

IN CONTEXT

When the U.S. was first founded, a lot of people generally valued agricultural goals. Any skills that

related to agriculture tended to be more valued, and those were the types of skills that children typically learned, especially in school settings.

In the later 1800s and early 1900s, however, the U.S. tended to value more industrial goals because that was the direction in which the country was heading. Cities and factories were being built, and so people valued industrial ideas a bit more.

Now the U.S. is more commercial, and the jobs that people take tend to be more conceptual. Today we tend to place more value on creativity, critical thinking, and individualism, qualities that were not as important or valuable at the country's inception.

As you can see, this type of cultural context might have an influence on a person, as well as on the things that a person will learn and develop.



TERM TO KNOW

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural factors impact learning and intelligence

2. Social Learning Theory

Vygotsky's theories aligned with another important theory in psychology called social learning theory. Social learning theory states that people learn not only in relation to their environments or internal mental processes but also in relation to the other people around them.

One of Vygotsky's ideas, which aligns with this social learning theory, was that cognitive processes, or those internal mental processes people have, begin as social ones.

In other words, we first learn how to do things externally with the help of others or through social interactions. Then, over time, we internalize these processes so that we learn and understand how to do them alone.

2a. Zone of Proximal Development

This idea is exemplified in what Vygotsky called the **zone of proximal development**, which is a range of tasks that a person is able to do, either alone or with the help of other people around him or her.

We start with tasks that we're able to do proximally or, in other words, with help from others. Then, over time, we do these things with increasingly less help until we're finally able to do them alone.

Thus, this process of learning essentially involves being able to move from one end of the zone of proximal development to the other.

Because learning is a social process, the teacher or the person who's assisting with the learning that's occurring provides certain kinds of help. A teacher first might model how to do something so that the child can watch and see how it's done. Then, the teacher might instruct, providing some verbal assistance to the child as he or she tries to perform the task.

The teacher might also scaffold the process. **Scaffolding** is when the teacher adjusts the task or provides

certain kinds of assistance for a person that hasn't yet mastered a particular task.

The instructor might use scaffolding to make the task a bit easier or to break it into parts so that a beginner, who hasn't quite learned how to do it, will have a little less difficulty learning. The idea is that over time, the child will be able to do the task alone, without adjustment.



TERMS TO KNOW

Zone of Proximal Development

Tasks children cannot complete independently but can complete with the skilled guidance of a peer or adult

Scaffolding

Temporary support to help one learn a new skill, adjusted and tailored to the individual needs of the learner until the learner can perform the task on their own

2b. Role of Language

It's also important to note the role of language in Vygotsky's theories. Language is a social process in itself, but it's also tied to cognition. In this way, language is the bridge that builds the zone of proximal development by allowing us to communicate assistance to others.

Additionally, a child begins to internalize that language and learn to use it themselves in a way that's referred to as self-talk. Self-talk is when someone talks to him or herself, either aloud or silently, showing that person's internal processes. You may have noticed that children who are trying to do something on their own will sometimes talk aloud.

According to Vygotsky, this is a normal behavior because it means that the child is internalizing those social processes, or trying to put them in his or her own mind.

Self-talk is thus considered an intermediate step in the zone, as it essentially involves talking to yourself as another social person.



SUMMARY

In this lesson, you learned that **Vygoysky's sociocultural theory** is a major psychological theory stating that a person's cognitive development is impacted by both the social and cultural contexts around that person.

You now understand that several of Vygoysky's ideas were aligned with **social learning theory**, a theory explaining how learning is a social, rather than a purely individual, process. In particular, Vygotsky's ideas about the **zone of proximal development** and the **role of language** exemplified the social aspects of learning.

Good luck!

Source: This work is adapted from Sophia author Erick Taggart.

**Scaffolding**

Temporary support to help one learn a new skills, adjusted and tailored to the individual needs of the learner until the learner can perform the task on their own.

Sociocultural Theory

Sociocultural factors impact learning and intelligence.

Zone of Proximal Development

Tasks children cannot complete independently but can complete with skilled guidance of a peer or adult.