Voices
of the
Mind

*A Sociocultural Approach
to Mediated Action*

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Preface

Informed readers will detect many voices other than mine in the pages that follow. In most cases they are the voices of colleagues who have given generously of their time to discuss this volume at various stages of its evolution. In some instances I have incorporated their comments directly into what I have written; in others I have revised my argument to respond to what they have said. The overall result is precisely what Bakhtin said any text must be—a thoroughgoing dialogic encounter with the voices of others.

Like most writers, I believe I can identify how each person contributed to my thinking. In the end, however, I am certain that my indebtedness is far more extensive than I am able to express. Therefore, I shall not attempt to name everyone whose voice is reflected in this volume but limit myself instead to those individuals who read all or part of the manuscript and provided comments. They include Aaron Cicourel, Michael Cole, Caryl Emerson, Joseph Glick, Fran Hagstrom, Michael Holquist, Sarah Michaels, Norris Minick, Elinor Ochs, Barbara Rogoff, Leslie Rupert, Peeter Tulviste, Mary Wertsch, and Vladimir Zinchenko.

Several organizations have also provided crucial support for my efforts. I am indebted to the Fulbright Commission and the International Research and Exchanges Board for their support of my visits to the Soviet Union over the past fifteen years. It was during my 1984 visit to Moscow State University as a Fulbright Senior Lecturer that I began to recognize the productive synthesis that can be worked out between the two geniuses whose ideas permeate this volume—L. S. Vygotsky and M. M. Bakhtin.

Major portions of the manuscript were written during my stay as Belle Van Zuilen Professor at the State University of Utrecht in 1987–88. The generous support provided by this institution and the colleagueship of its staff, especially Ed Elbers, Paul Goudena, David Ingleby, and John Shotter, made the year extremely productive.

Clark University has provided a wonderful setting for continuing this work. The general atmosphere of the institution and the intellectual challenge of my colleagues and students have provided just the kind of support I have needed to pursue my research. My discussions with Bernard Kaplan and Ina Uzgiris have been particularly helpful. Clark University has also brought me into contact with Jacob Hiatt, whose example has inspired many to try to contribute something to the improvement of this world.

Over the past three years the Spencer Foundation has been very generous in providing support for the empirical research from which I have drawn to illustrate several of my theoretical points. More recently, the Literacies Institute has supplied funding for the theoretical and empirical research I have outlined here.

My biggest debt is to my family, most immediately, my wife, Mary, and our sons Nicholas and Tyler, who have provided me with a supportive and joyful atmosphere in which to live and work. In the broader sense, this debt also extends to other family members, especially my parents, Clifford and Mary Louise Wertsch. The love, tolerance, and insight that characterized their child-rearing practices are increasingly impressive with time. One of the most important gifts my parents gave me was the sense of wonder that comes through contact with voices from other cultural and intellectual traditions. This as much as any other inspiration is behind my efforts to understand the ideas of thinkers such as Vygotsky and Bakhtin, who are far removed from me in time, space, and culture. My attempt to enter into dialogue with them has transformed my understanding of what it is to be human. It is my fondest hope that it can also contribute to the general dialogue among voices needed to make our world a safer and more joyful place.

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Introduction

In a time of unprecedented interest in psychological phenomena, it is ironic that the discipline of psychology seems less capable than ever of providing a coherent account of the human mind. We know more about isolated mental processes and skills, but we seem incapable of generating an overall picture of mental functioning. We can often find regularities under controlled laboratory conditions, but as soon as we move to other, more natural settings these findings seem to disappear in the sea of "real life." Such problems do not stem from an absence of resources or of effort on the part of psychologists. There are more researchers and practitioners, more journals, more professional organizations, and more computers devoted to psychology today than ever before. Yet the results are increasingly less satisfactory if we stand back and ask what psychology tells us about human nature.

This is not to say there are not some bright spots. We know far more about brain functioning than we did even a few years ago, we have a much richer picture of the social and cognitive functioning of infants than we had earlier, and a variety of new forms of psychotherapy seems to provide help where none existed before. I do not wish to underplay the significance of these scientific accomplishments or the major practical benefits associated with them. Even the brief list I have provided, however, serves to highlight a fundamental weakness of the discipline: we have many isolated, often arcane pieces to a larger puzzle, but we have no coherent, integrative picture of the whole. We can answer detailed questions about neuronal activity or neonatal reflexes, but we have very little to say about what it means to be human in the modern world (or any other world for that matter). Jerome Bruner's

(1976) comments about the problems psychology has had in creating a coherent "image of man" are as apt today as they were fifteen years ago.

One of the most striking manifestations of this weakness is that psychology has become increasingly less capable of providing insights into the major social issues of the day. It often has something to offer if one is concerned with a specific clinical syndrome or brain dysfunction, but it has had very little impact on broader social and cultural issues such as educational failure and educational reform.

That the discipline of psychology has been silent on major social issues was made obvious during the recent revolutionary events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. In trying to understand these events, ordinary citizens and professional commentators from around the world spoke of the psychological changes being experienced by entire populations, yet they did not find it useful or necessary to turn to psychologists or psychological theories for enlightenment.

Before exploring why this is so, I should note that I do not believe that an adequate account of political revolutions—or any other form of social change—can be reduced to some kind of psychological analysis. Nor do I wish to suggest that all psychologists must be concerned with political or social issues. Many other practical concerns have provided a focus for much of the best research being carried out today, and indeed, studies with a purely theoretical motivation often contribute more to our understanding of applied problems than work aimed directly at dealing with them.

What I do wish to argue, however, is that much contemporary research in psychology does not in fact have the practical implications so often claimed for it. In my view, a major reason is the tendency of psychological research, especially in the United States, to examine human mental functioning as if it exists in a cultural, institutional, and historical vacuum. Research is often based on the assumption that it is possible, even desirable, to study the individual, or specific areas of mental functioning in the individual, in isolation. In some cases its proponents justify this approach by claiming that we must simplify the problems we address if we are to get concrete research under way. Only then, it is argued, can we go on to understand how cultural, historical, or institutional "variables" enter into the picture.

Such criticism is not new. It has been raised in American psychology at least since the time of John Dewey. In his presidential address to the American Psychological Association entitled "Psychology and Social

Practice," Dewey (1901) argued that the discipline could not deal with the many phenomena it sought to examine if it continued to focus so exclusively on the individual organism. In his view, psychology would have to come to terms with how individuals are culturally, historically, and institutionally situated before it could understand many aspects of mental functioning.

As Seymour Sarason (1981) points out, however, Dewey's ideas never attained prominence, at least in American psychology. Most APA presidential addresses reflect the fact that "from its inception a hundred years ago, American psychology has been quintessentially a psychology of the individual organism" (p. 827). This individualistic orientation is characteristic of the discipline in general and certainly exists in studies of children's development, an area that will be of particular interest here. As Barbara Rogoff (1990) notes, "an emphasis on the individual has characterized decades of research carried out by American investigators studying children's intellectual milestones, IQ, memory strategies, and grammatical skills. It has also been characteristic of the incorporation of Piaget's theory into American research in the modern era" (p. 4).

One devastating effect of the tendency to study the isolated individual or mental process "in vacuo" (Rommetveit, 1979) has been to cut psychology off from dialogue with other academic disciplines and with the general public. Instead of participating in the construction of a coherent theory of the human mind and human action, debates in psychology have all too often devolved into arcane internal arguments of little interest to anyone but those directly involved. This is a sorry state of affairs for the social sciences and for academic inquiry in general, and it has been particularly unfortunate for psychology.

But the problems I am outlining are not only of an intellectual nature. They are also manifested in the institutional structure of contemporary psychology. Psychologists often argue that because their discipline has become so complicated, fragmentation is an unfortunate but inevitable fact of life. According to this view it is next to impossible to keep up with what is going on in one's particular division of the American Psychological Association, let alone in the field in general, and any attempt to keep abreast of developments in other disciplines is completely out of the question.

There is no doubt that unprecedented burdens have been placed on contemporary scholars of psychology by new technology, the explosion of research findings, and the creation of new subdisciplines. I do

believe, however, that it is possible to formulate research problems so that areas of inquiry do not become cut off from one another. This involves conducting research (often of a quite specialized nature) into concrete empirical problems but in such a way that it always remains anchored in some more general picture.

It is not possible to do this simply by expending additional effort. That is, I am not suggesting that the next generation of psychologists should have an advanced degree in sociology, literature, physics, or some other discipline as well as in psychology. In fact, such a practice would probably only result in new forms of intellectual subspecialization. Rather, we need to reformulate the questions we ask so that disciplinary and subdisciplinary integration will be a natural, or even necessary, outcome. We need to develop the type of theoretical frameworks that can be understood and extended by researchers from a range of what now exist as separate disciplinary perspectives. Furthermore, and perhaps even more important, we need to formulate methodologies that do not automatically exclude the participation of researchers from a variety of disciplines.

As Vladimir Zinchenko (1985) and others have suggested, a key aspect of this process is creating units of analysis that work against the tendency toward disciplinary fragmentation and isolation. Too often, the choices we make lock us into a set of implicit commitments that may or may not be desirable when viewed from a more general perspective. The notion of "mediated action" I shall outline in subsequent chapters is an attempt to meet this challenge.

The task I am describing is by no means impossible, yet it is not a task to be carried out by a single investigator. The mass of theoretical and empirical information that underlies today's research would alone make such a model inadequate. Instead, ours must be a collective effort. Relevant examples of this kind of effort can be found in recent decades, usually in situations where scholars were motivated by practical considerations to overcome the differences in perspective that so often separate them. Members of the Frankfurt School of critical theory, for example, turned to philosophy, sociology, aesthetics, psychology, and history in their effort to understand the tragic political and cultural events that swept over Europe in this century.

Another example, one which shapes much of what I shall have to say in this volume, can be found in the work of Soviet scholars between the Revolution of 1917 and the onset of the Stalinist purges in the mid-1930s. Motivated by a desire to help construct what they saw as

the first grand experiment in socialism, these scholars tried to deal with practical issues that extended across disciplinary boundaries. As a result, they combined ideas from a range of what are now considered quite separate disciplines.

One can begin to understand this mix of disciplines, and of theory and practice, by considering a typical day of one of the outstanding figures of the time, L. S. Vygotsky. Such a day might have involved participating in a seminar with the philologist N. Ya. Marr, the developmental psychologist (and later neuropsychologist) A. R. Luria, and the cinematographer Sergei Eisenstein, then conducting a clinical training session for teachers of deaf children, giving a lecture to a psychoneurology meeting about semiotics, and finally, writing about the implications of Stanislavsky's methods in drama for an account of inner speech. Vygotsky dealt with many topics in a fairly cursory fashion, but his attempts to identify a set of issues that could provide the focus for an integrated, interdisciplinary effort were quite productive. They continue to inform our view of a variety of problems today, more than a half century after his death.

The approach to mind I am proposing is intended to avoid the pitfalls of psychological research that focuses narrowly on the individual or on specific mental processes in vacuo. While this approach has, of necessity, an interdisciplinary flavor, it should be recognized that it is being proposed by someone whose main areas of competence are developmental psychology and semiotics. As a result, it goes into little detail on problems of history, social theory, and other topics that must ultimately be addressed if the approach is to evolve. It is my hope, however, that what I have to say will provide a beginning, an initial framework within which the voices of psychology and semiotics can come into productive dialogue with the voices of other disciplines.

I

Prerequisites

The basic goal of a sociocultural approach to mind is to create an account of human mental processes that recognizes the essential relationship between these processes and their cultural, historical, and institutional settings. Such an approach is concerned with topics that arise frequently in everyday as well as academic discussions. When we speak of the American or Japanese or Russian way of thinking, for example, or the eighteenth-century mind as opposed to the twentieth-century mind, or the type of reasoning characteristic of bureaucratic rationalism, we are dealing with forms of mental functioning that are of concern to a sociocultural approach to mind.

Although these topics obviously touch on psychological issues, the discipline of psychology, with few exceptions, has had very little to say about them. This volume is meant to help redress this problem. In particular, it seeks to introduce the perspective of developmental psychology into the discussion. As I noted in the introduction, this does not simply mean applying existing theoretical constructs; it means devising new ones. Although I shall examine only a few concrete examples of sociocultural settings in order to illustrate the usefulness of these new constructs, my hope is that these will suggest further topics for more detailed investigation.

As is the case with any theoretical approach, this one rests on certain underlying assumptions. At the most basic level, these assumptions are related to what it is one is trying to describe or explain. In this connection, it is not surprising that different approaches have quite different agendas. Many psychologists have concerned themselves with the universals of mental functioning, and this emphasis on mental processes,

which are assumed to be ahistorical and universal, has dominated research in contemporary western psychology. In contrast, my focus emphasizes what is socioculturally specific. In this sense it is in accord with the "cultural psychology" outlined by John Berry (1985), Michael Cole (in press), Douglas Price-Williams (1980), and Richard Shweder (1990). As Stephen Toulmin (1980) notes, the roots of cultural psychology extend back at least as far as Wilhelm Wundt (1916). In recent years, a variety of factors (Cole, in press) have inspired renewed interest in the issues this discipline addresses. At a general level, this renewed interest is grounded in the assumption that "cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, transform, and permute the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind, self, and emotion" (Shweder, 1990, p. 1).

By choosing to focus on either universals or sociocultural situatedness, one makes certain essential assumptions about which phenomena are interesting and deserve attention. The existence of these assumptions and their implications are not often appreciated, however, and the result has been endless misunderstanding and bogus argument. Since there are undoubtedly universal as well as socioculturally specific aspects of human mental functioning, the choice here is not simply one between sound and misguided sets of assumptions; rather, it is a choice between two different research agendas, both of which need to be addressed and, where possible, integrated.

A second, related area in which underlying assumptions often differ is over the question of what counts as an appropriate description or explanation. Investigators often disagree on this issue even when they do agree on a universal or socioculturally specific focus. A wide range of other issues arises here, but one of the most central is that of units of analysis. As V. P. Zinchenko (1985) has noted, the major schools of psychology have differed widely in their choice of such units. Behaviorists have selected stimulus-response associations, Gestalt psychologists have focused on gestalts, and Piagetians have examined schemata. Certainly, these choices are not random, but one is hard-pressed to give a definitive explanation of why one unit of analysis is inherently appropriate while others are not.

I shall try to clarify my views on what needs to be described and explained and what constitutes the appropriate method for doing so by outlining several of the assumptions inherent in the title of this volume. These assumptions involve action, the notion of voice and

other forms of semiotic mediation, an approach to mental action that emphasizes diversity rather than uniformity in the processes involved, and a concern with the cultural, institutional, and historical situated-ness of mediated action.

Why Action?

A fundamental assumption of a sociocultural approach to mind is that what is to be described and explained is human *action*. Furthermore, the units of analysis that will guide my line of reasoning will be grounded in action. The notion of action I have in mind owes a great deal to the various "theories of activity" that have been outlined in Soviet psychology (Leont'ev, 1959, 1975, 1981; Rubinshtein, 1957), but the influence of several other theorists will also be evident.

When action is given analytic priority, human beings are viewed as coming into contact with, and creating, their surroundings as well as themselves through the actions in which they engage. Thus action, rather than human beings or the environment considered in isolation, provides the entry point into the analysis. This contrasts on the one hand with approaches that treat the individual primarily as a passive recipient of information from the environment, and on the other with approaches that focus on the individual and treat the environment as secondary, serving merely as a device to trigger certain developmental processes.

These two views are often seen as originating with Locke (1852) and with Descartes (1908), respectively, but they continue to exert a powerful, though often unrecognized influence on contemporary psychological theories. Behaviorist and neobehaviorist theories remain grounded in assumptions similar to Locke's claims that human knowl-edge emerges through the impact of the environment, while contem-porary theorists such as Noam Chomsky (1966) pursue an avowedly Cartesian line of reasoning. This latter perspective views the human mind largely in terms of universal, innate categories and structures, and the environment primarily in terms of how it provides material for testing innately given hypotheses and influencing developmental processes.

A basic orientation toward action is nothing new in philosophy or psychology. It was a fundamental aspect of the writings of the Ameri-can Pragmatists (Mead, 1934). In addition, Jean Piaget's powerful influence has insured that the concept of action, or subject-object inter-

action, has come to be appreciated by those interested in genetic epistemology and developmental psychology. Recent developments in disciplines such as cognitive science reflect a similar orientation, as the prominent role given to schemas, or patterns of action, in these disciplines attests. All these traditions are based on the assumption that, in trying to understand mental functioning, one cannot begin with the environment or the individual human agent in isolation. They take action and interaction as basic analytic categories and view accounts of the environment and human mental functioning as emerging from them.

To say that an approach accepts some notion of action as its starting point, however, still leaves out a great deal. Many types of action can be distinguished, and it thus becomes essential to specify the type or types one has in mind. A useful overview can be found in Jurgen Habermas's (1984) account of sociological approaches. Habermas has generated a set of categories of action that are based on the relationship between the actor and the environment. His account of the types of environment (or "worlds") that are relevant to such an exercise derives from Karl Popper's "three-world" theory. In Popper's (1972) view, "we may distinguish the following three worlds or universes: first the world of physical objects or physical states; secondly, the world of states of consciousness, or mental states, or perhaps behavioral dispositions to act; and thirdly, the world of *objective contents of thought*, especially of scientific and poetic thoughts and of works of art" (p. 106).

Following I. C. Jarvie's (1972) action-theoretic translation of Popper's three-world theory, Habermas has arrived at a general typology of approaches to action. In considering the relation between the actor and the first world of physical objects or physical states, Habermas (1984) notes that "since Aristotle the concept of *teleological action* has been at the center of the philosophical theory of action. The actor attains an end or brings about the occurrence of a desired state by choosing means that have promise of being successful in the given situation and applying them in a suitable manner. The central concept is that of a *decision* among alternative courses of action, with a view to the realization of an end, guided by maxims, and based on an interpretation of the situation" (p. 85). Habermas goes on to remark that decision-theoretic and game-theoretic approaches in social sciences such as economics, sociology, and social psychology can be understood as the extension of teleological models of action to "strategic

models." In strategic models "there can enter into the agent's calculation of success the anticipation of decisions on the part of at least one additional goal-directed actor" (p. 85). In arguing that strategic models are extensions of teleological models, Habermas recognizes that "strategically acting subjects must be cognitively so equipped that for them not only physical objects but decision-making systems can appear in the world. They must expand their conceptual apparatus" (p. 88). He stresses, however, that this does not entail any difference in ontological presuppositions; instead, both types of models presuppose "*one* world, namely the objective world" (p. 87).

In teleological and strategic models of action, the relationship between actor and world is judged in terms of truth and efficacy. The goal-directed actor can "make assertions that are *true* or *false* and carry out goal-directed interventions that succeed or fail, that *achieve* or *fail to achieve* the intended effect in the world" (Habermas, 1984, p. 87). Furthermore, teleological and strategic models of action generally assume that the appropriate focus of analysis is the solitary actor entering into interaction with the objective world.

A second concept of action outlined by Habermas focuses on the relationship between the actor and Popper's second world ("states of consciousness, or mental states, or perhaps . . . behavioral dispositions"). This is the concept of "dramaturgical action," which is grounded primarily in Erving Goffman's (1959) notion of the "dramaturgical metaphor." In this type of action, "the actor evokes in his public a certain image, and impression of himself, by more or less purposefully disclosing his subjectivity. Each agent can monitor public access to the system of his own intentions, thoughts, attitudes, desires, feelings, and the like, to which only he has privileged access . . . Thus the central concept of *presentation of self* does not signify spontaneous expressive behavior but stylizing the expression of one's own experience with a view to the audience" (1984, p. 86).

As Habermas notes, there are important connections between dramaturgical action and teleological action. An actor typically carries out what Goffman terms "impression management" with strategic goals in mind. In contrast to teleological action, however, where cognition, belief, and intention play a fundamental role, in dramaturgical action "desires and feelings have a paradigmatic status" (p. 91). Furthermore, in contrast to judgments based on truth or efficacy, judgment in dramaturgical action is based on concepts of sincerity or truth*fulness* and authenticity.

For Habermas the action-theoretic translation of Popper's third world ("the world of objective contents of thought") produces "normatively regulated action." As he notes, this concept of action "does not refer to the behavior of basically solitary actors who come upon other actors in their environment, but to members of a social group who orient their action to common values . . . The individual actor complies with (or violates) a norm when in a given situation the conditions are present to which the norm has application. Norms express an agreement that obtains in a social group. All members of a group for whom a given norm has validity may expect of one another that in certain situations they will carry out (or abstain from) the actions commanded (or proscribed). The central concept of *complying with a norm* means fulfilling a generalized expectation of behavior" (p. 85).

As Habermas also notes, the normative concept of action has given rise to the role theory that occupies such an important place in sociology. The central criterion for judging an action according to the normative concept of action is neither truth nor efficacy on the one hand nor sincerity, truthfulness, or authenticity on the other. Instead, judgment is concerned with the issue of complying with a norm, something that in turn "does not have the cognitive sense of expecting a predicted event, but the normative sense that members are *entitled* to expect a certain behavior" (p. 85).

Although Habermas draws extensively on accounts of all three types of action, he has found it necessary to propose a fourth type, namely, "communicative action." "The concept of *communicative action* refers to the interaction of at least two subjects capable of speech and action who establish interpersonal relations (whether by verbal or by extraverbal means). The actors seek to reach an understanding about the action situation and their plans of action in order to coordinate their actions by way of agreement. The central concept of *interpretation* refers in the first instance to negotiating definitions of the situation which admit of consensus" (p. 86). In contrast to the first three types of action, each of which is oriented primarily to one of the three worlds proposed by Popper, communicative action is simultaneously oriented to all three. Furthermore, in contrast to the criteria used to judge each of the first three types of action, communicative action is judged according to the criterion of reaching understanding.

My comments on Habermas's analysis of types of social action hardly do justice to the set of complex issues he addresses. Yet even in this very brief overview it is clear that different accounts of action