

Original Research Study

Everyday Cultural Development in the Life of a Three-year-old Child: A Vygotskian Interpretation of Dialectical Relations and Shared Meaning

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Abstract

Social interaction is impossible without words and words are nothing without shared meaning (Vygotsky, 1987). Children participate in home contexts that are full of shared cultural understandings. The research reported here is part of an ongoing study exploring the appropriation, transfer and transformation of values and beliefs within and between three generations in case study families living in Australia. Drawing on a cultural-historical framework (Vygotsky, 1987) and the work of neo-Vygotskians (Hedegaard, 2005; Moll & Greenberg, 1990) the study investigates factors that mediate and/or motivate family funds of intergenerational cultural understanding. Data for the study was generated through a multi-phased iterative process consisting of interviews, photographs and video footage. This article focuses on an incident where a three year old child uttered a word that was initially misunderstood by both the researcher and her mother. It was not until the child's father intervened that the significance of the word "alive" began to emerge, linking the child with her grandfather through her father. Grappling with the Vygotskian concepts of shared meaning and generalisation within the child-rearing practices of this family, it appears that the genesis of thinking, speech and social interaction are dialectically interrelated. Making the familiar strange to understand cultural meaning better remains the challenge of both the present and future research.

Introduction

Intergenerational households have long been known to hold family funds of knowledge that are shared, transferred, transformed and appropriated in everyday family practices. Wolf (1966), an anthropologist, investigated the notion of household sustainability within a peasant community and developed a theory he termed 'funds of economy'. Wolf found that households developed strategic and complex economic knowledge and activities as part of their way of life. Such knowledge was passed from generation to generation within families and community groups. The economic and political struggles experienced by families often shaped the transfer and content of this knowledge.

Within the field of education Moll and his colleagues gained inspiration from Wolf's work (Vélez-Ibáñez and Greenberg, 2005) and theorised the knowledge and understanding of households and community clusters as 'funds of knowledge'. These researchers worked particularly with Mexicans living in the United States of America and they proposed that the day-to-day knowledge shared within families could enhance children's school learning if it was acknowledged and used as a basis for pedagogy (see Andrews & Yee, 2006; Mercado & Moll, 1997; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992; Moll & Greenberg, 1990; Vélez-Ibáñez & Greenberg, 2005).

More recently, researchers around the world in the fields of anthropology, psychology, sociology and education have explored a range of family knowledge including an Australian study of grandparents and the ways in which they support their grandchildren's scientific and technological thinking (Robbins & Jane, 2006); a British study investigating the intergenerational learning occurring between children and their grandparents (Kenner, Ruby, Jessel, Gregory & Arju, 2007); a Czech Republic study of parents' and grandparents' beliefs about preschoolers' learning (Shebloski, 2001); a Taiwanese study investigating the values held by parents and teenagers (Yi, Chang & Chang, 2004) and the like. Further, the work of the Institute of Family Studies in Australia and the Families Commission in New Zealand have also contributed to the understanding we presently hold regarding the funds of knowledge that are shared, transferred and transformed within intergenerational households. Many studies have spanned two generations, most participants have been primary school aged children or older and social learning theories have dominated the theoretical underpinnings of such studies, the majority of which have been framed within quantitative methodologies including some extremely large scale longitudinal projects.

This article takes a paradigm shift and considers a qualitative study grounded in cultural-historical theory. It begins with an initial discussion of the theoretical framework of the study which then leads into a brief outline of the methodology and methods employed. Highlighted are the Vygotskian notions of shared meaning and generalisation, internalisation and mediation, which are illustrated through the presentation of initial research data and tentative findings from the project. The article concludes with the continuing challenge of making the familiar strange in order to further understand the dialectic nature of children's cultural development.

Theoretical Framework

The study is framed within cultural-historical theory. Originating from the work of Lev Vygotsky (1896-1934) and his colleagues, cultural-historical theory affords a way to investigate "the understanding of human cognition and learning as social and cultural rather than individual phenomena" (Kozulin, Gindis, Ageyev, & Miller, 2003, p. 1). Vygotsky's dialectic methodology (Vygotsky, 1987; 1997; 1999) provides for the foregrounding of phenomena studied in the process of motion, struggle and change by encompassing the individual within social, cultural and relational contexts. Most research in Vygotsky's day tended to look at the static end point of development, what the child now knows; but a dialectic methodology is much broader than that, it is more about capturing the dynamic processes by which ideas, understandings and development change as part of everyday life. A dialectic methodology allows for the dynamic ever changing processes of development to be analysed holistically within ever changing social situations (Hedegaard & Flear, 2008). Daniels (2008a, p.47) reminds us that Vygotsky's "central concern was to study human functioning as *it developed* rather than considering functions that *had developed*" (my emphasis).

Vygotsky's work was considered radical at a time when educational and psychological thought was mainly based in the assumptions that persons were autonomous, capable of shaping their own existence through the exercise of will and purpose, and being essentially unchanged through the course of history and culture (Vygotsky, 1987). Vygotsky rejected the internal/external Cartesian dichotomy of such thinking in favor of "conceptualiz[ing] development as the transformation of socially shared activities into internalized processes" (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996, p. 192) [original emphasis]. The implication in the Cartesian model is one of discontinuity and separation between the internal and the external, the individual and the social. In contrast Vygotsky's cultural-historical model encompasses the mutual multi-directional holistic engagement, change and transformation of the social situation and the individual. Rogoff (2003) has conceptualized this dynamic dialectical process as transformation through participation; through participation people transform not just themselves but also the communities in which they participate. She explains that "[i]ndividuals and generations shape practices, traditions and institutions at the same time that they build on what they inherit in their moment in history" (Rogoff, 2003, p.62).

Vygotsky's theorising encompassed a holistic approach to development. He set out to achieve a synthesis of contending views (the isolation of biological and mental development) within the structure of a completely new theoretical base. He ambitiously sought to combine description and explanation along with a deepening understanding of the higher mental processes of thought, language and decision making, as social and cultural processes. He put forth a revolutionary rather than evolutionary perspective on development which Fleer (2007, p.2) argues, "provides a theoretically rich framework for undertaking research with children in the 21st century". Among Vygotsky's multiplicity of rich theoretical constructs are those of generalisation, shared meaning, internalisation and mediation, which have been highlighted in this paper as lenses through which to view the participation of a three year old child within her intergenerational family. It is not the author's intention to separate or isolate these constructs, but rather they are recognized as some of the interlinking dialectic relations and transitions that may occur as part of children's participation in everyday intergenerational family contexts. The dialectical interlacing of these and other constructs is foundational within Vygotskyian theorising (1978, 1987, 1999). The following paragraphs briefly introduce these constructs.

Generalisation and Shared Meaning

Vygotsky was interested in the relations between the child's cognitive and social development, the genesis of thinking and speech (Vygotsky, 1987). He argued that a single word does not relate to a single object, rather a word can donate a myriad of understandings, objects, sensations, generalisations and the like. A word without meaning is an empty sound, it is no longer speech – word and meaning cannot be separated. Meaning and speech are dialectically related. Therefore "just as social interaction is impossible without signs (words), it is also impossible without meaning" (Vygotsky, 1987, p.48). The imparting of experience or content from one person to another requires the communication of shared meaning through a shared system of tools and signs – human speech. Here communication and understanding occur through the process of generalisation where both partners understand the concept/s behind the words that are expressed. Therefore word meaning is viewed not only

as a unit of thinking and speech but as a unit of generalisation and social interaction, a unity of thinking and communication. [...]

Only when we learn to see the unity of generalisation and social interaction do we begin to understand the actual connection that exists between the child's cognitive and social development (Vygotsky, 1987, p.49) [emphasis in the original].

It is within the construct of verbal thinking that language and speech become tools and signs used as mediators of higher mental functioning as well as transmitters and communicators of culture. It is impossible to understand the development of shared word meaning if the communication and the intellectual aspects are divorced one from the other. Speech is part of dialogue, it is cooperative, it involves social interaction and it involves intellectual endeavour. Speech and language are dialectically related mediators, tools and signs of shared meaning and generalisation.

Mediation and Internalisation

For Vygotsky the concept of mediation was a vital aspect of the development of higher mental functions (Vygotsky, 1997). Vygotsky was intrigued with the ways in which language mediated mental functioning and provided individuals with the capacity to gain knowledge, understanding and control of both themselves and the wider world. However, Vygotsky did not limit mediational means to speech and language. He identified a range of mediation tools and signs both human and symbolic such as writing, counting systems, diagrams, drawings and cultural artifacts which facilitated the transformation of mental functioning from interpersonal to intrapersonal. Vygotsky proposed that

[e]very function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first on the social level, and later, on the individual level: first, between people (*interpsychological*), and then inside the child (*intrapsychological*)... [A]ll higher functions originate as actual relations between human individuals (Vygotsky, 1978, p.57) [emphasis in the original].

This transformative process takes time, involving dialectically interrelated struggles, relations and transitions, and “[f]or a long time it [the behaviour] continues to exist and change as an external form of activity before it finally moves inward” (Vygotsky, 1999, p.11). The internalization of a behaviour is not an end point (as discussed previously) but rather part of the holistic process of development and change which continue throughout life, for having made the “transition inward, they [behaviours] change the laws of their activity and again become part of a new system where new patterns are dominant” (Vygotsky, 1999, p.11). For Vygotsky (1978, p.57) “[t]he internalization of socially rooted and historically developed activities is the distinguishing feature of human psychology”.

The Study

Aim

This study seeks to investigate the relations and transitions of values and beliefs within three-generational families. Of particular interest are what values and beliefs families/households privilege, how these came to be important and how they are mediated and transformed across, between and within generations as part of the family/household child-rearing practices.

Sample

Participants in the study are families/households that have a child or children aged 3 – 6 years, a parent or parents, and one or more other significant family members of a third generation, for example grandparent/s. Participant families/households therefore span three generations but do not necessarily live at the same address. While it is envisaged that there would be up to five families/households involved in the study, this paper is based on data generated by the first family. The participant families were recruited from a University Early Learning Centre and local Community Crèche in south eastern Melbourne, Australia.

Data Generation

A case study research approach was taken with data being generated through an iterative process consisting of family interviews (up to five 1 – 1½ hour focus group interviews per family), photographs (20 – 30 per family) and video footage (up to 1 hour per family). Families also discussed artifacts and objects of significance to them. Data generation with any one family occurred over two to three months. Families chose when, where and who would participate in family interviews which meant on occasions there were one, two or three generations present. Interviews were interspersed with opportunities for the families to take photographs and/or short videos of family child-rearing practices for discussion at the next or subsequent meetings. The children were active participants in this process participating in all aspects of the data generation process.

Data Analysis

The focus of initial data analysis is a model developed by Hedegaard (2005) that invites consideration of the personal, the institutional and the societal aspects of the intergenerational interactions. This approach allows for the exploration of the associated motives, values and beliefs of those taking part. Alongside this is consideration of the Vygotskian concepts of generalisation and shared meaning, mediation and internalisation concepts which were discussed earlier in this paper.

Searching for Shared Meaning

‘Alive’

During the first interview with Mary (pseudonym) a child who had recently celebrated her third birthday, her mother and her father, the conversation moved to her mother attempting to outline the overall family context by requesting Mary to explain the living arrangements of the extended family. During this process of questioning Mary was providing one word answers that matched the questions until it came to identifying the dog belonging to Nanny and Poppy, her paternal grandparents who lived some distance away in a rural area. In this instance Mary deviated from the string of expected answers and initially her response was misunderstood by both her mother and the researcher. The conversation occurred as follows; note particularly line 49:

- 37 Mother: Who lives with Nanny?
- 38 Mary: Kelly
- 39 Mother: Nanny?
- 40 Mary: Poppy
- 41 Mother: Yes, and ...
- 42 Father: Who else? ...

- 43 Mother: Who licks you?
44 Mary: L U C K.. Y!! (said in unison with mother)
45 Researcher: Oh, who's Lucky?... Is Lucky a ... mouse?
46 Mother: Tell (Researcher)
47 Researcher: Is Lucky a ... bird?
48 Mother: What is he?
49 Mary: Alive! (Family 1, Interview 1, 18 June 2008)

At this point in the conversation it seemed that Mary's thinking had moved away from the associations being requested of her as the answer she gave was not the expected answer of 'dog' but rather she said 'alive'. My response as the researcher turned to formulating a further question. I did not want to miss what she was meaning however I was attempting to generalise her response searching for shared meaning. I initially thought she was going to move on and discuss something that was not alive, perhaps some inanimate object such as a soft-toy dog. However that was not what she had intended. At this point Mary's mother had also reached for generalisation and shared meaning by providing the answer she was originally expecting from Mary (line 55). The conversation continued:

- 50 Researcher: A what?... He's alive?
51 Mother: He's a dog
52 Father: NO!
53 Mary: He's a doggieeee
54 Mother: He's a dog
55 Father: My mum and dad have got a dog called Lucky, he's a Dalmatian
56 Researcher: Oh (Family 1, Interview 1, 18 June 2008)

Mary's father who had been listening intently to the conversation picked up on Mary's utterance of 'alive' in a very different way. He too was seeking shared meaning. Note his response in line 52; this was a very emphatic 'NO' which led to further elaboration and explanation in line 55. However, this still did not explain Mary's 'alive'. It wasn't until her father continued with:

- 57 Father: Dad (referring to Poppy) always says 'lucky to be alive'
58 Mother: Alive!
59 Researcher: Aaaaah!
60 Mother: That is why she answered ... alive! (laugh)
61 Researcher: Ohh!... Alive! (Laugh)
62 Father: They got it given to them from a place that was going to
63 send him to heaven
64 Researcher: Oh, ok
65 Mother: And Poppy always tells her that Lucky is lucky to be
66 alive, that's why she says 'alive'
(Family 1, Interview 1, 18 June 2008)

In this instance Mary's father identified the intergenerational relations that linked his daughter's utterance with that of her grandfather's common expression. He externally mediated the utterance bringing shared meaning to all taking part in the interview. This sharing of meaning is likely to have been completely lost if he had not intervened in the conversation, yet once it was explained it was easily understood by those present. It could be assumed that Mary had memorised the phrase 'lucky to be alive' spoken regularly by her grandfather yet was unable or unwilling in this instance to verbalize all that the word 'alive' encompassed for her.

For Mary, ‘alive’ contained so much meaning, culturally and historically, physically and emotionally, socially and intellectually. Lucky is not just any dog, Lucky is a dog that is lucky to be alive, a dog that has been accepted into her grandparents’ home and lives, a dog that she has been encouraged to love and care for, a dog that has a vital role in the life of her intergenerational family. Through her interactions with Lucky, Mary is observing and experiencing the cultural-historical values of her family such as an appreciation of life, that living creatures such as dogs can give and receive nurture and care. She is being exposed to culturally appropriate phrases and expressions that are used in the wider society of which she is a part. She is learning ways of behaving as she participates in everyday family life; she is experiencing the interconnectedness of social situations and family values as interpsychological functions, which she may in time internalize so that the values and behaviours of her family become her own intrapsychological functions.

Mediation Factors

Matching coats

Some weeks later I was introduced to Lucky through a home video taken by Mary’s family. As mentioned earlier, data for the study was generated through a range of tools including photographs and video. The photographs and video were used as tools of mediated recall as part of the iterative research process and on this occasion Mary, her mother and father, and I were viewing a series of short video clips the family had filmed during the previous two weeks. The clip showing Lucky was filmed at Mary’s grandparents’ home. Here Mary is claiming a personal bond with Lucky, see line 147. She is identifying Lucky as having a particular relationship with her and her family; he is not just any dog but a particular dog that has a particular place in her family. Again the concept of shared meaning related to Lucky is evident. (Note, voices from the video are in cursive script to distinguish them from the ensuing conversation.)

- 141 Mary: Lucky ... Lucky (chuckle) oh... look
 - 142 Mother: Call him over to you
 - 143 Mary: Lucky... Lucky... Lucky! ... Lucky!!! (Lucky comes to
Mary but keeps walking towards Poppy)
 - 144 Poppy: Stand... Stand... Stand there
 - 145 Father: That’s my father
 - 146 Researcher: It’s your dad, is it?
 - 147 Mary: And that’s my Lucky
- (Family 1, Interview 4, 25 August 2008)

As we watched the video clip a second time the conversation moved to the fact that Mary was wearing clothes that resembled Lucky’s spots and winter coat. Lucky and Mary were not only connected through relationship, but at times also in physical appearance as evidenced in the following photograph and interview transcript.



Figure 1: Mary and Lucky, August 2008.

- 173 Mother: It was... it was very by chance that Lucky had a
174 purple coat on (laughing) the same as Mary's
175 Father: Yeah (laugh)
176 Mother: And Mary had her gumboots on that looked like Lucky
177 Researcher:(Chuckling) I wondered whether you had
178 dressed them up
179 Mother: No (laughing)
180 Father: And a polka dot dress (chuckling)
181 Researcher: Because
182 Mother: No (laughing)
183 Researcher: She has got the gumboots
184 Mother: They are her Bluestone Valley boots, they stay in
Bluestone
185 Researcher: Aaah!
186 Mother: We don't cart everything backward and orward... and it
just so happens that her Bluestone boots at the moment look like
Lucky (laugh)
(Family 1, Interview 4, 25 August 2008)

Here physical appearance further mediated the relationship Mary had with Lucky. They both wore purple coats and Mary had various pieces of clothing that featured black and white spots. Although the resemblance was not 'intended' for the photograph/video clip (line 173) when Mary's parents became aware of it there was a sense of emotional togetherness and shared meaning as both parents chuckled and laughed about the similarities. It was as if

suddenly something as familiar as the choice of a child’s clothes had been made strange and they were taking a new look at an everyday family practice. Further discussion revealed that Mary’s purple coat was her ‘preschool coat’ and that the spotted gumboots were her ‘Bluestone gumboots’ (Bluestone Valley being a pseudonym for the town where her grandparents’ lived). These items of clothing normally belonged in different locations yet on this occasion they were worn together while visiting with Lucky.

Dialectic relations and transitions

Mary’s one word utterance ‘alive!’ to describe her grandparent’s dog Lucky provides us with an example of the dialectic relations and transitions that occurred on different levels as a young child, her parents and a researcher grappled to gain shared meaning. The following diagram graphically depicts the ‘explosion’ of thought that occurred as Mary uttered the word ‘alive’. The diagram also depicts the relations or connections of thought towards various people (Poppy), places (Bluestone Valley) and a family pet (Lucky), at first creating conflict (each adult initially made different thought connections) yet through the process of dialectical tension, followed by a backwards and forwards transition of conversation, shared meaning resulted.

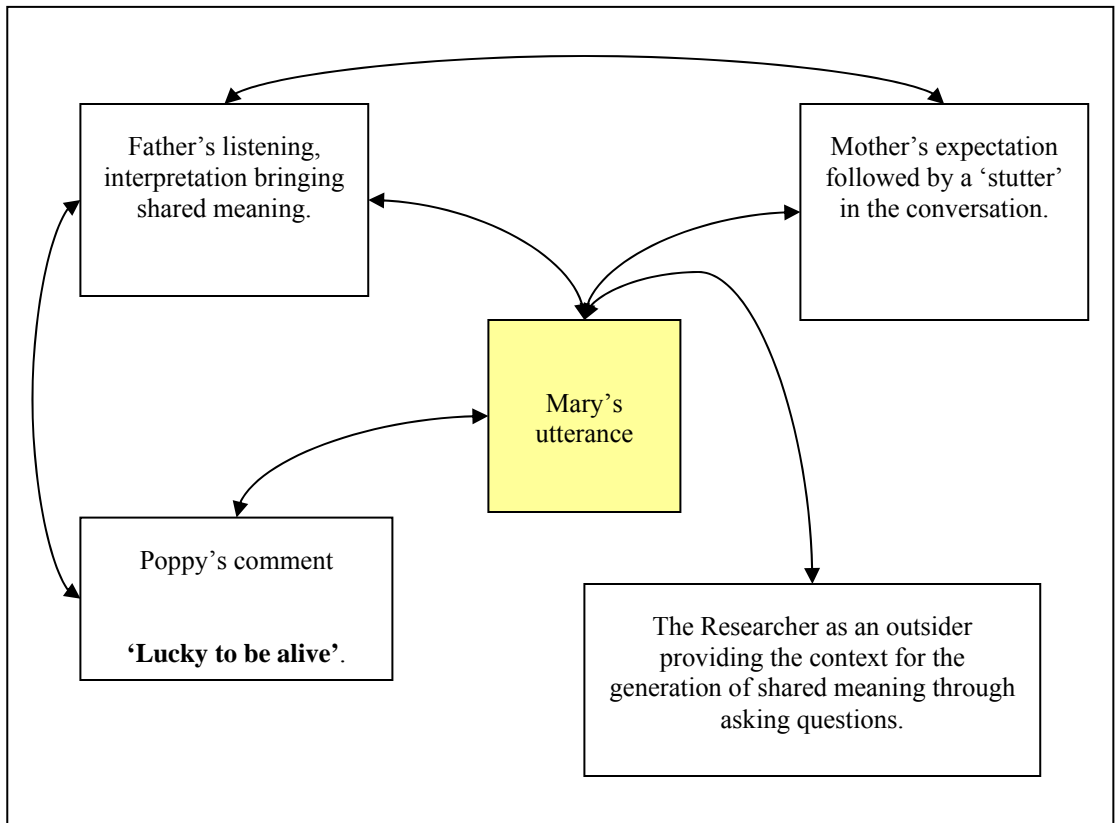


Figure 2: Sharing, shaping and interpreting family shared meaning.

Within such dialectical relations and transitions Mary experiences and learns about the culture of her family (that is: interacting with her grandparents in a rural area) while she and

other family members create family culture (that is: particular ways of dressing and ways of behaving in the proximity of dogs). There is constant movement within and between the generations where experiences and learning can lead to shared meaning and cultural development. As Mary interacts with her grandfather and hears him say that Lucky is 'Lucky to be alive' she has the opportunity to participate in family ways of behaving such as valuing and appreciating the gift of life. The phrase or expression 'Lucky to be alive' is also used within the wider society of which Mary's family is a part. Her grandfather's expression presently associated with a family pet is likely to be encountered in other societal contexts. As mentioned earlier, aspects of Mary's intergenerational family experience may in time become internalised and owned as part of Mary's personal ways of behaving.

Mary's cultural ways of behaving or cultural development is described by Vygotsky as a

special type of development, in other words the process of the child's growing into a culture cannot be equated, on the one hand, with the process of organic maturation and on the other, it cannot be reduced to a simple mechanical assimilation of certain external habits (Vygotsky, 1997, p.231).

Mary is coming to know the culture of her three-generational family as she experiences and participates in everyday life. At the same time her family is seeking to both include her in these experiences and generate shared meaning and understanding through their combined relations. Vygotsky (1997) would argue that Mary is not just assimilating cultural ways of understand and behaving but rather through various mediational means, Mary has the opportunity to participate in and generate shared meaning, generalisation and in time possibly internalization of her family cultural ways of behaving.

Conclusion

The focus of this article has been a Vygotskian interpretation of a three-generational family conversation that occurred as part of a series of research interviews. Exploring the dynamic and interrelated notions of shared meaning and generalisation, mediation and internalization provided an opportunity to make *strange* aspects of familiar family life (that is: the family pet Lucky and the Poppy's common expression 'Lucky to be alive'). This snippet of family interaction provides a glimpse into the dialectic nature of Mary's cultural development within the institution of her three-generational family. In keeping with Vygotsky's cultural-historical theorising I conclude with a comment made by Daniels during the 2008 International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR) conference in San Diego: "[T]alk shapes institutions, institutions shape talk and talk shapes and is shaped by thought" (Daniels, 2008b).

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