Valsiner and Van der Veer: A Case of Intellectual Interdependency

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Historians of science have so far been unable to establish when Valsiner and van der Veer first met, but it must have been in the remote past, probably in the mid-1980s. Planes and trains already existed; personal computers, the Internet, and cell phones did not. Given Valsiner's addiction to international travel, the young and still handsome researchers most likely met in Amsterdam, the erstwhile capital of drugs and prostitution, where van der Veer lived at the time. It is unclear what caused their first encounter. Probably, one of them sent the other a card asking for the reprint of an article, but this cannot be established with any degree of certainty.

In general, it is now quite difficult to understand how transatlantic communication between scientists took place in those distant times. Possibly, people were still writing and dispatching letters like in the older times, or perhaps prehistoric forerunners of email already existed at universities. Be that as it may, the former decathlete and the former middle-distance runner turned out to have many interests in common and soon engaged in lively conversations and plans for future joint research projects. At the time, van der Veer had published a book on "critical psychology" (Van IJzendoorn & van der Veer, 1984) in English and a monography about the Russian pedologist Vygotsky in the local dialect (Van der Veer, 1985). Valsiner was writing about almost anything and had presumably already prepared parts of his excellent book on Soviet developmental psychology (Valsiner, 1988).

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1 Joint Book Projects

It is probably fair to say that the history and theory of Soviet psychology belonged to Valsiner and van der Veer's first joint research interests. Van der Veer had frequently visited the Soviet Union to find information for his book on Vygotsky and was baffled by the local circumstances and customs. Valsiner miraculously escaped from that socialist paradise and had intimate knowledge about the various schools of Soviet psychology and Soviet society. After some tryouts in the form of joint articles (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1987, 1988, 1989; Valsiner & van der Veer, 1988), the two researchers decided it was time for a far more ambitious project: a lengthy book about the historical Vygotsky that situated his ideas in the philosophies, ideologies, and theories of his time.

Writing such a book was not an easy task. Various interesting books on Vygotsky's ideas had already been written (Kozulin, 1984, 1990; Wertsch, 1985), but none of them had the focus that Valsiner and van der Veer had in mind. Vygotsky's original writings were difficult to get by, and republications were either heavily abridged (Vygotsky, 1962), formed a curious compilation (Cole et al., 1978), or were largely unreliable in other ways (the *Collected Works* published in Russian from 1982 to 1984). Fortunately, repeated visits to Moscow, valuable help by Vygotsky's daughter Gita Lvovnaya, and sustained searches in many Western libraries proved successful and, in the end, a sizable list of historical writings enabled the writers to begin their reconstruction of Vygotsky's synthetic efforts.

The resulting book, *Understanding Vygotsky: A quest for synthesis* (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991) was well received by the critics (Brozhek, 1993; Bryant, 1993; Desforges, 1993; Kozulin, 1993; Netchine & Netchine-Grynberg, 1994; Pufall, 1992; Ratner, 1993: Smith, 1993, Tryphon, 1995; Youniss, 1994) and is still being cited, and possibly even read, by modern researchers who invoke Vygotsky's ideas.[1] With hindsight, the book was remarkable in that it stressed the fact that Vygotsky relied heavily on his predecessors and contemporaries to construct his own theory of the human mind. Vygotsky was not "a visitor from the future" (Jerome Bruner), nor a researcher whose ideas were "ahead of our time" (Norris Minnick) but a very bright scholar who operated within the constraints of his cultural, social, and political environment. Various chapters of the book sought to demonstrate the interconnectedness of Vygotsky's ideas with those of his contemporaries. A chapter on Gestalt psychology, for example, showed how Vygotsky used the non-reductionist ideas of Köhler, Lewin, Koffka, and Goldstein and at the same time resisted their non-dialectical approach to human development. It is only recently that the link between Vygotsky's theorizing and the ideas advanced by Gestalt psychologists has received new attention in several writings by Yasnitsky (cf. Yasnitsky & van der Veer, 2016). Another chapter that introduced a new perspective to the existing view of Vygotsky focused on his historical role within the discipline of Russian child

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[1] At the moment of writing this contribution, the English and Brazilian (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1996) editions together had been cited approximately 2550 times.

studies or pedology. Throughout his career, Vygotsky worked in the discipline of pedology, and many of his writings can only be understood against the background of this now extinct science and its role in the Soviet educational system. As the authors argued, pedology allowed Vygotsky to combine the study of the development of novel complex functions with that of the educational needs of normal and retarded children (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991, p. 327). The focus on pedology was quite novel at the time, and it is only recently that Byford has deepened the study of the history of this discipline in several excellent publications (e.g., Byford, 2014, 2016, 2021; cf. van der Veer, 2020). All in all, *Understanding Vygotsky* asked the reader to consider the links between Vygotsky's ideas and the web of other ideas available to him in order to understand his intellectual creativity in its historical context.

For the authors, writing the book about a previously little known Russian pedologist once again taught them how immensely interesting and rewarding it can be to read the older psychological authors (e.g., Baldwin, Bühler, Hall, James, Janet, Köhler, Pavlov, Piaget, Stern, Watson), and I think it is fair to say that researching Vygotsky's legacy encouraged them to continue studying psychology's history. In this sense, the Vygotsky book laid the foundation for the much later book on the social mind.

However, the authors were not yet done with Vygotsky and decided that it was high time to provide the Western reader with a collection of reliable writings by the Russian researcher. This resulted in their *Vygotsky reader* (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994), which was well received by the reviewers (Guldberg, 1995; Lankshear, 1995; Lunt, 1995; McCrone, 1994) and is still being cited by colleagues.[2] Again the authors sought to change the existing image of Vygotsky by selecting writings that highlighted unknown facets of his creativity. The chapters on the socialist alteration of man and on fascism in psychoneurology, for example, showed that Vygotsky subscribed to the ideology of his time and was not at all working in a political vacuum. But most important, probably, except for the excellent translation of the little-known writings by Theresa Prout, was the fact that the editors managed to find many of the sources to which Vygotsky referred and thus again allowed the readers to situate Vygotsky in the scientific playfield of his time. As Boring (1950, p. ix) wrote more than 70 years ago, "without such knowledge… [the researcher] mistakes old facts and old views for new, and he remains unable to evaluate the significance of new movements and methods."

In that same year 1994, the authors also edited a quite different volume. This was the book *Reconstructing the Mind: Replicability in Research on Human Development* (Van der Veer et al., 1994; cf. Matusov, 1996). The book emphasized the need for replication in the social sciences and discussed the various forms of replication and their positive sides and potential drawbacks. In addition, the methods of replication were discussed, and various examples of actual replications were presented in some detail. Interestingly, the volume drew little attention at the time and has been cited

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[2] At the time of writing, it had been cited almost 900 times.

only a handful of times. It is possible that *Reconstructing the Mind* was published just too early: the interest in replicability in empirical research boomed two or three decades later (e.g., Zwaan et al., 2018), and it is only now generally accepted that reproducibility of results is a crucial factor in research practice. Despite its lack of immediate success, editing the book was a most interesting experience for Valsiner and van der Veer, who several years after its appearance gave a joint course on replicability in Tartu, Estonia, which may have left a lasting impression on some of the students, because one of the professors used to arrive in the lecture hall on inline skates.

The avid and addictive reading of historical sources by both Valsiner and van der Veer almost inevitably led to a new major book: After all, how can one, day in day out, read the most interesting and entertaining articles and books in French, German, Russian, English, etc. without giving in to the urgent impulse to share their treasures with colleagues and friends? That would be most egoistic and egoism is not a vice the authors wish to be accused of. It has been written that the seed for the book emerged in now long-forgotten quasi-Russian "kitchen talks" in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and that it matured for almost 15 years. That is difficult to prove, of course, but what seems sure is that Valsiner's boundless curiosity and his chronic graphomania played a decisive role in designing and writing a book, which by its sheer volume—almost 500 pages—could equally well serve as a presse-papier. I am, of course, talking about *The Social Mind: Construction of the Idea* (Valsiner & van der Veer, 2000; cf. Burr, 2001; Van Oers, 2002), which appeared in 2000 and has since the date of its appearance been regularly cited by colleagues.[3] It was a voluminous book indeed: in nine long chapters, the authors discussed intellectual interdependency, social suggestion, Pierre Janet, James Mark Baldwin, American pragmatism, George Herbert Mead, European holistic psychology, Lev Vygotsky, and modern theories about the social mind.

It is almost impossible to summarize the book in a few lines or paragraphs, and I will make no attempt to do so and just make a few remarks. What can be said is that the idea of the social nature of the human mind was always quite prevalent in psychological, psychiatric, and sociological writings. In the late nineteenth century, for example, experts wondered whether persons could be suggested to commit a crime under hypnosis and whether in such a case they could be held accountable for their deeds. Other thinkers (e.g., Baldwin, Elias, Mead, Janet, Vygotsky) suggested that the individual mind somehow emerges by introjecting social laws and cultural phenomena and scripts and thereby is originally and fundamentally social. Even our most intimate behavior and our most private thoughts are bound by social rules and examples we first encountered in social interaction, books, films, or the Internet. The unique combination of social imitations and borrowings makes it possible to speak of individual minds, which nevertheless are thoroughly social.

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[3] More than a 1000 times, to be precise.

2 Conclusions

Since the mid-1980s, Valsiner and van der Veer, while drinking gallons of milk and consuming impressive portions of the now almost extinct eel, have jointly contributed some 20 publications to the psychological literature, some of which were frequently cited by colleagues, while others were virtually ignored. Historians of science have wondered how these writings came into being and who contributed what to specific publications. However, the point of many of Valsiner and van der Veer's writings is that such questions are by definition impossible to answer: it is exactly the issue of intellectual interdependency that makes it impossible to say where the one ends and the other begins in their joint writings. The only thing that can be established with any degree of certainty is that they immensely enjoyed their transatlantic cooperation.

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