Understanding the developing subject in the Cultural Psychology of education

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Abstract

Cultural psychology of education strives to understand the locality of the developing individual. This article tries to interpret the mission and vision of the cultural psychology of education in the background of modern society, with individualizing and techno-mechanistic social trends as its prominent feature. The concept of "contextualized individual" is proposed as a potential framework to conceptualize the relational and contextual dependence of the developing subject. The article also re-interprets Li and Xu's 2018 paper "Developmental Psychology Research Based on Educational Practice in China" to explore how to use the framework of the "contextualized individual" to theoretically channel and generalize educational researches and interventional studies in a local educational setting.

Keywords: Cultural psychology; Development; Education; Modernity; Subjectivity.

It was more than ten years ago that our research group in Shanghai first met and worked with Jaan Valsiner and the cultural psychology team led by him. Back to that time, we were and still are struggling with the problem of how to drive theoretical generalization from our empirical researches rooted in the educational social reality of the Chinese society. With Valsiner's help and support, we began our amazing and fruitful journey with cultural psychology. Along with the advancement of this young subject, enormous efforts have been made to cultivate and facilitate dialogues and co-operations between different cultures and countries. The Centre of Excellence "Ideas for the Basic Education of the Future" (IBEF) on Innovative Learning, Teaching Environments, and Practices was born in this background. The IBEF network holds a deep concern with the current trends and the possible pathways to the future of basic education worldwide, and it has established

a firm network connecting China, Brazil, Italy, Denmark, Norway, and Luxembourg. Being a member in the IBEF network is not to look for answers in order to solve the problems in hand, but to continuously put ourselves in open and sometimes even "dangerous" dialogues to challenge take-for-granted premises and strive for new possibilities.

In this vein, this article is also an effort to initiate dialogues aimed at a better understanding of a cultural psychology of education, and it addresses questions such as: How is the educational process perceived in the modern society? What is the mission and vision of the cultural psychology of education? What would a developing subject be like in the framework of the cultural psychology of education? How to conceptualize students' development as rooted in local school contexts? In this article, we tried to present explorative efforts made by the Shanghai research team led by Xiaowen Li. This article is far from giving any answer to the questions proposed above, but rather it has opened up more gaps and possibilities for future dialogues.

Culture of education: the educational process in the background of modernity

As the power of capitalism and technology gradually become the two main principles organizing social life, their influence on educational process draws more and more attention nowadays. When conducting and conceptualizing educational practices, we have observed that a trend of individualism, instrumentalism, and utilitarianism has become prominent (Marsico, 2017, 2018), which penetrates all levels of education, even preschool (He, 2018). Within this trend, vivid and dynamic learning and teaching processes have been reduced to linear accumulation and acquisition of ready-made knowledge and skills in the service of higher scores and improved academic achievement. Also, in present educational psychology, learners have been investigated from an individualistic perspective that takes learning outcomes as the results of certain inner psychological traits, such as abilities of attention, resilience, and emotional regulation, to name just a few (Tateo, 2019).

The present situation of educational process is situated in the bigger context of social life (Tateo, 2018). To be more specific, the phenomena mentioned above is closely tied with and has its origin related to the modernity of the present society, which makes it necessary to carefully examine the present condition of modern society to have a better understanding of our targeted issue. In this vein, it may be fruitful to go back and revisit classic works and ideas, among which Georg Lukács's work deserves special attention. In his most influential book "History and Class Consciousness", he has sensitively captured the techno-mechanistic trend of modernity in every corner of social life (Wu, 2002). Although the educational process is not directly mentioned in his work, we can still be inspired by his excellent analysis of labor. As Wu (2002) pointed out, Lukács's analysis emphasized a lot of the characteristics of this trend: abstraction, formalization, and rationalization, which breaks down the organic, fluid, and holistic characteristics of human labor:

> Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process, on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labor is progressively rationalized and mechanized his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more contemplative […]. In this respect, too, mechanization makes of them isolated abstract atoms whose work no longer brings them together directly and organically; it becomes mediated to an increasing extent exclusively by the abstract laws of the mechanism which imprisons them (Lukács, 1968/1971, p. 89).

In light of Lukács's work, it can be inferred that the computability of the educational process in the educational area is disintegrating the organic and artistic part of education and that the learning and teaching processes are becoming more and more rigid. With the deepening of the social division of labor, interdisciplinary integration and cooperation becomes more and more difficult. Both the students and

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teachers can hardly regard themselves as responsible for the educational process and both sides are reduced to a mechanical part integrated into a mechanical system. Students, the subject in the learning process, are treated as atomic individuals and are categorized into abstract labels according to certain evaluating rules (e.g. the homo economicus in Boll, 2018) and educational researchers use these labels to deal with massive student groups. When faced with particular individual out of the categories, such as individuals with special needs, they usually refer to inner psychological traits to rationalize the present situation, which makes it nearly impossible to advance educational intervention researches.

The cultural psychology of Education in the modern society

To some extent, we understand the cultural psychology of education as researchers' continuous efforts to stand against this techno-mechanistic societal trend. In the place of this societal trend trying to abstract individuals into atomic individuals randomly interacting with each other, the cultural psychology of education calls to restore individuals' interpersonal and contextual dependence. As Marsico has pointed out in her manifesto for the cultural psychology of education: "It is a process through which individuals become human" (Marsico, 2017, p. 765). When considering the setting up of a cultural psychology version of educational research, Marsico referred to two main theoretical foundations: (1) Bruner's emphasis on cultural inquiry in psychological research to understand cultural resources as both constraints for and promotors of human development, (2) Valsiner's cultural psychology of semiotic dynamics to approach the subjective aspects of human experience. Under this manifesto, both practical and theoretical efforts have been carried out to advance its development. For example, Marsico and Tateo (2018) proposed the concept of "Educational Self" to investigate how the self emerges and unfolds dynamically in educational contexts. They focus on how the social discourse functions as symbolic resources in the subjective student's dialogical process of self-definition.

It seems to us that these two theoretical origins echo the division between "hermeneutic-historicist" and "phenomenological-existentialist" perspectives proposed by Cornejo (2007). In Cornejo's analysis, these two research traditions represent two different conceptualizations of meaning. The "hermeneutic-historicist" perspective focuses on the macro-social processes and its key words are objectivity, social construction, and individual as meaning receiver, while in the "phenomenological-existentialist" perspective, the micro-social process is given more attention and the subjective and context-dependent dimension of individual's experience as a meaning-giver from a first person perspective are centered (Cornejo, 2004). As the two orientations are highlighted, the void between them also inevitably appears. Thus, as Cornejo pointed out, the key question becomes how to "generate a framework which describes the variability and creativity of human action while assuming the intrinsically social nature of the person" (Cornejo, 2007, p. 249).

This challenge will be encountered with changeable appearances if the problem of culture in psychology is seriously considered. It can be discussed as the relationship between individual and society (Xu, 2019), the embodiment of subjectivity in social activities (Li, 2009), the tension and coordination between the "'generality' of the social-cultural context, and the "particularity of individual development" (Marsico & Tateo, 2018, p. 3), and the becoming process of being "human" in a more general way (Marsico, 2017). The dualism between object and subject raises concerns not only in psychology, but also in philosophy. In Karl Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach", we can find an accurate analysis:

> The chief defect of all previous materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that things (*Gegenstand*), reality, sensuousness are conceived only in the form of the object, *or of contemplation*, but not *as sensuous human activity*, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was set forth abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 569).

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One thing that relates to our issue in Karl Marx's work is that it prompts us potential traps in dealing with the relationship between the individual and culture. As Marx has written, the trap can be analyzed from two perspectives: (1) When conceptualizing culture as an objective system of reference, resource, or tool box, there is a risk that we take the object as given, ready-made, and waiting for the subject to process and synthesize it. We may ignore its historical construction in the individual's practice, which means the object is historically constructed and the meaning of the object to the subject depends on its connection and relation to the subjective individual and this relation historically evolves along with the individual's real-life practice; (2) As we put much attention on the subjectivity of the developing individual, Marx reminds us that we may have ignored its deep roots in the social and cultural context and developed the active aspect of subjectivity only in an abstract or even random way. This idea makes its way to Gadamer's expression of "the alienation of consciousness itself": "Consciousness and self-consciousness do not give unambiguous testimony that what they think they mean is not perhaps a masking or distorting of what is really in them" (Gadamer, 2008, p. 116).

The contextualized individual as a potential framework of integration

With the advancement of researches in cultural psychology, the second problem becomes more salient compared to the first one, as the constructive meaning-making process is now well acknowledged. How to conceptualize subjectivity with its "intrinsic social nature" when we emphasize its constructive and creative function in a phenomenological orientation? Different theoretical efforts have been made to solve this problem, taking the emerging issue of intersubjectivity as an example (Cornejo, 2008). Besides the relational dimension of self, Marsico (2015, 2017) also pointed out that the context-dependence of humans should be given special attention. She reminded us that the context should not only be restricted to the "here and now", but needs to be put into a bigger picture of broader social spaces. From this perspective, the subject is regarded as a developing individual immigrating among and crossing boundaries of various social institutions, such as family, school, and community, as various social spaces co-construct the context of the instant context for the individual's development.

The relational and contextual dimension of the self requires that researchers closely examine each individual's real life to investigate the emergence and elaboration of the subjective self with its deep roots (Wu & Xu, 2020). In this paper, we propose that Marx's work offers us a direction to reach a "contextualized individual" in the flesh and can be used as a framework to integrate the two dimensions of the social ontology of subjectivity:

> That is to say, not of setting out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men as narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh; but setting out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process demonstrating the development of the ideological reflexes and echoed of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the brains of men are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises (Marx & Engels, 1998, p. 42).

A "real, active" man is a contextualized man living his material life-process. Marx emphasized the material aspect of the life-process, as it is only through social relations and interactions (material aspects in the same way as labor in Marx's sense) that the individual is connected to nature in a cultural way, verifies his present social existence and has the possibility of constructing nature. The material life-process constitutes the essential context for men's development. Back to the educational setting, capitalism as the material aspect of modern life has produced the techno-mechanistic trend in school education. Here, it is noted that contexts should be considered from the perspective of the subjects' activities: the given social and cultural context is a result of the individuals' previous activities and will continuously be the prerequisites for and be

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changed by the individual's next practice (Wang, 2002). Understanding context from the perspective of activity also indicates the possibility for educational intervention: the context can be changed through individuals' practices. Moreover, there is an objective and relational dimension in the contextualized individual's active subjectivity emerging from constant meaning negotiation process among individuals: the individuals are always in certain forms of social interaction and subjective transcendence derives from the awareness of their own social practices with other individuals. Social relations verify the historical social existence of the contextualized individual and mediate the bi-directional process of internalization <> externalization between the contextualized individual and culture.

In this paper, we propose to use the concept of "contextualized individual" to emphasize the two dimensions of contextual and relational dependency of the developing individual. It can be approached in the following way: the context-dependence presents itself as a powerful prerequisite with all the forms of locality for individuals' activities, such as cultural values, resources, and hierarchy of social orders, from which emerges certain forms of possibilities and constraints for the individual's development. The relational dimension emphasizes that it is through individuals (rather than a single individual) who can always depend on and cooperate with each other in certain forms of social interaction that one is enabled to inherit, advance, stand against, and make changes on the power of previous developmental stages.

The cultural Psychology of education rooted in Chinese educational practices

The cultural psychology of education refuses to merely follow the present educational ideology of what "a child should be" like (Marscio & Tateo, 2018, p. 6). How should we reveal the ideological covering and approach the contextualized individual's real life-process and analyze their "actual development"? The next part will use Li and Xu's paper (2018) "Developmental Psychology Research Based on Educational Practice in China" as an example to reinterpret Li and her colleagues' work in the Chinese educational system from the framework of the "contextualized individual" discussed above. In Li's work, we can see a way of how to investigate the subjective self's development as the continuous transcendence of contexts through social relations knitted in the school cultural ecosystem.

Li has been participating in educational practices and research as a developmental psychologist for nearly thirty years. By working closely with teachers and being in the field in a long-term educational reform program of New Basic Education on a weekly basis, Li and her colleague scholars had the opportunity to put their feet on the ground, break through ideological and normative conceptualizations of students' development, and directly participate in daily school practices. Her nonstop empirical work and theoretical thinking has guided her to gradually put research focus on "students' potential in growth, developmental fullness and educational ecosystem" (Li & Xu, 2018, p. 341). We can analyze her work along two lines: (1) The study of grade characteristics as the basis of students' potential development. The students' developmental potential is inferred by a converging analysis of students' specific school life conditions in each grade; (2) An educational intervention study by building the school's cultural ecosystem, which directly changes and constructs the students' social relations in their living context to improve and facilitate their psychological development.

From empirical research to synthesized analysis: students' potential in growth

In contrast to the deconstructive trend in psychological research, which has emphasized too much the active aspect of subjectivity of a single individual, it is obvious that there is a dimension of interpersonal objectivity in Li's findings related to grade characteristics. As it has been pointed out: "Interestingly, from

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teachers in different schools, we often got similar information about the students of the same grade" (Li & Xu, 2018, p. 346). Students' "problematic" behaviors present a characteristic of grade rather than an age distribution. Such interpersonal objectivity derives from the real social setting of school educational practices. To some extent, it can be said that the particular institutional setting has produced students' particular problems and possibilities, and the grade characteristics revealed in the Chinese educational context cannot be applied directly into other different educational settings. To reveal the objective existence of grade characteristics, Li's work went through three stages: (1) interviewing teachers to collect information on students' transitional phenomenon and form hypotheses about students' developmental trends; (2) empirical researches regarding themes derived from the hypothetical developmental trends; and (3) converging findings from the interviews and empirical researches to infer and verify the logic of students' developmental trends. The three stages go back and forth between different levels of generalization of the target issue: between the general developmental trend and the more concrete behavioral phenomena.

Li uses a key concept, "potential in growth", to facilitate and work with students' subjective development. The concept of "potential in growth" means: "students of each stage (mainly characterized by grade) develop certain self-identity tendencies that could be viewed as a value orientation of self-positioning" (Li, 2012, p. 920). This tendency may function as a vague and unconscious force which takes on flexible forms to actualize itself and opens up a whole world for new social meanings to emerge. For example, it can present itself as students' problematic behaviors if it is not appropriately guided and supported. Li uses gradual development of value-oriented self-identity in "a spiral modal of restraint-impulsiveness" to represent the emerging and forming process of students' potential in growth: when students enter new forms of social relations, their behaviors will be impulsive as they are experimenting different and personal ways to reach and actively internalize the social values in the new context. As they get more and more familiar with and use up all the resources and forms of the social relation, they will get rigid with the previous values and need to break up the constraints to transcend themselves (Li & Xu, 2018). For example, when the fourth-graders are used to identifying themselves through peer groups, it is commonly seen that they would refuse to interact with and help weak students as if their own reputation and position would be ruined by this contact (Li, 2011). In this case, the value of peer groups becomes so rigid that it prevents the fourth-graders from being friendly. New values and social relations should be constructed to guide students to transcend and develop into a higher level. When students enter a new level of potential development, it requires transcending all the old forms of social relations and meanings and creating new ones to actualize oneself. To some extent, this form of subjectivity produces a whole revolution on self-configuration rather than segmented and isolated changes.

From the framework of the "contextualized individual", there is one aspect that should be highlighted in the concept of "potential in growth": students' developmental potential is not pre-given but arises as an outcome of participating in social interactions in contextual activities. In this sense, development is a process of "sensuous dialectics" (Wang, 2013), which means that the original positive resources and conditions for development can be transferred and experienced as restraints along with the individual's developing process. The concept "Sensuous" means that it is from the process of social practice that new developmental needs and potentials emerge. "Dialectics" in developmental science usually focuses on the synthesis movement based on the negation and double negation between A and non-A. A sensuous dialectics differs from this point, as it emphasizes that along with the process of A's development grows the power of A's self-transcendence as non-A. A is negated from its own developing course rather than by external forces as a pre-set non-A. It can be said that the sensuous dialectics has a firm focus on the dynamic process and tries to investigate individuals' local life processes to answer the question of how individuals develop their new hopes, expectations, and desires towards next development. The outcome of sensuous dialectics can be theoretically abstracted afterwards as a dialectic logic between A and non-A, such as Li's spiral modal of restraint-impulsiveness conceptualizing students' development as a spiral movement between restraint and

impulsiveness. But to understand and capture the local manifestation of this dialectical model at different stages in the specific context, as students' deep hope, expectation, and desire, researchers need to adopt a sensuous dialectics to go deep into and have a firm grasp of students fresh, vivid, and local life-processes.

From the framework of sensuous dialectics, students' self-transcendence is derived from their active social practice in their social relations and it requires transcending the original relational framework and unfold itself in new forms of social relations. Development is a revolution in the sense that if they cannot transcend themselves, not only they cannot develop further, but also the previous achievements would be ruined. As in the example of the fourth-graders not willing to help the weak ones, this phenomenon is rarely seen in younger graders and should be interpreted as a breaking out in the fourth grade as a manifestation of being rigid, constrained, and requiring to transcend to a new developmental level. Peer groups can facilitate students' development at the very beginning but now function as a constraining power for the fourth-graders, which grows exactly from student's social interactive practice. It is exactly from this vantage point that we can see clearly the meaning and point for the educational intervention to step in.

The school cultural ecosystem: using relational networks to support students' potential development in school activities

The objectivity dimension of potential in growth determines that educational intervention can only guide students' development according to their own trends, as Li has clarified with the term "Shunshi", which means following, acting upon, and exploiting the developing trend of a situation (Li & Xu, 2018, p. 345). Also, educational interventions can be effective only by going deep into students' school social practice and constructing alternative forms of social relations, as the individual transcends the previous developing level through being part of the plurality of "contextualized individuals" in social relations. In Li's educational intervention study, these two insights are actualized in the construction of the school cultural ecosystem. As Li has written:

> The school needs to pay close attention to the grade characteristics of students' self-identity when constructing a developmental culture. Based on the particular tendency of self-identity, it is possible to activate students' inner pursuing power for a particular tendency, to propose evaluating principles and to design cultural activities aimed at problems (Li, 2011, p. 230).

Students' developmental potential can be incubated and fully explored in the dynamic school cultural ecosystem. The notion of "contextualized individual" with the two dimensions of contextual and relational dependency has theoretically required that effective and long-lasting educational interventions should put efforts to construct students' local contexts by organizing social activities with rich cultural resources and various forms of social interaction. In Li's work, the school cultural ecosystem is able to construct a dynamic and complex network by integrating organizational units from different levels: groups inside a class, class, grade across classes, and school across grades (Li, 2011, p. 221):

> Students' interaction, including inner-class, inter-class and inter-grade interaction, contains rich sources for constructing the school ecological system. From low to high level of organization, there are cooperation activities inside a group in a class, activities of being hosts of a class crossing groups, interest group crossing classes, "Big hands with small hands" crossing grades. The school organizes and constructs activities according to students' developmental characteristics of abilities and social interacting tendency, which in actual constructs a relational network adapting to students' developing potential.

The form of the school cultural ecosystem can be regarded as a "relation" and its content can be understood as "cultural activities". Different levels of relation imply different possibilities and constraints for activities. Moving from groups to the whole school, we will find that students' positions in the network become richer and broader and they are more competent in integrating cultural resources. As a dynamic

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ecosystem, every level of organization works in the background of other organizations, while also constituting a part of background for other organizations (Li, 2011). Thus, students at different levels are active subjects of their own potential development, and at the same time are interacting objects of students developing in other levels. For example, in the activity of "Big hands with small hands", students from the higher grade should help new students to get familiar with the new norms and adjust to the school context. In this case, both the higher-grade students and the first-grade students are active subjects and objects for each other. In this way, students become active subjects with real objects to verify and actualize their development in the school context. The school cultural ecosystem enables them to depend on each other and create for each other. In the school cultural ecosystem, the relational dependence of subjectivity requires providing rich and flexible forms of social interaction to the individual students to integrate present cultural resources and transcend their previous developmental levels. The contextual dependence of subjectivity has predetermined that certain cultural values should be integrated into activities to enable students to make meaning and embody their semiotic mediational systems.

In sum, the problem of the context is an essential issue in investigating individual development (García-Palacios et al., 2018). Conducting developmental and educational research from the framework of the "contextualized individual" means to firmly grasp the two dimensions of contextual dependency and relational dependency of the active developing individual. Li's work provided a way to theoretically generalize the students' subjective development situated in the specific Chinese educational context. As the context is relatively stable, there is a dimension of objective intersubjectivity termed as students "grade characteristics". Identifying the contextualized objective intersubjectivity enables researchers to use it as reference to guide and construct educational intervention practices. The frame of the "contextualized individual" also requires constructing the educational intervention as a cultural ecological network with various forms of social interaction and activities to cultivate, promote, and actualize students' developmental potential of different levels. Educational interventions conceptualized in this way are organic, dynamic, artistic, and closely connected to its cultural traditions rather than mechanic, fragmented, and imposed from the outside.

Conclusion

In the background of individualized and techno-mechanistic social trends of modern society, the setting of school education is experienced more and more as an alien power with its own aims and destination, as if it has its own subjectivity. As a continuous effort to restore an individual rooted in culture and society, the cultural psychology of education calls for interdisciplinary and international dialogues and cooperation. It is a young science with a great mission. In this vision, it is not only the richness of empirical educational practices in different countries, but also the variety of cultural traditions that should be invited and integrated into the joint effort to cultivate new possibilities for the future of education.

Contributors

S. XU and A. WU worked on literature reading for the theoretical framework and analyzed the findings and data from our previous researches. S. XU drafted the manuscript. X. LI supervised, revised, and edited the manuscript. All authors read and approved the manuscript.

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