

Vygotsky on Human Nature and Human Development

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Vygotsky's ideas about human development have sometimes been difficult to understand or have been misinterpreted because of different underlying assumptions about human nature. The primary source of this difficulty is the assumption Vygotsky made about the fundamentally social nature of human beings, which stands in contrast to an individualistic perspective that pervades psychological research in the U.S. The individualistic predilections of American psychology have been explicated and criticized under the heading of "methodological individualism," but they are so pervasive and deep seated that their influence persists, often in unrecognized ways.

Beginning with some observations on what it was like for a newly minted American Ph.D. holder to encounter Soviet psychology in the 1970s, I shall explore the difficulties involved in translating Vygotsky's ideas into a fundamentally individualistic cultural setting. The impediments I shall outline are not so much the result of scientific difference as of underlying cultural differences in how social and individual processes are understood. Although the concerns I shall outline were not the primary interest of Vygotsky or any of his intellectual descendants in the U.S.S.R., reflecting on them can provide insight into implicit, yet very powerful assumptions that guide the line of reasoning found in Vygotsky's writings, as well as of psychologists from the West.