

Emancipatory, Scientific Psychology: Vygotsky's Marxist Cultural-Psychology

Carl Ratner

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Abstract: It was Vygotsky's great insight that psychological problems are scientifically understood and resolved as macro cultural problems. The more deeply that psychological phenomena are grounded in historical materialist factors and dynamics which organize them, the more emancipatory they are because they can contribute to comprehensive, radical emancipation of society and psychology. Conversely, striving to escape from culture into personal and interpersonal subjectivity is illusory freedom as well as unscientific analysis of behavior. Vygotsky's historical-materialist Psychology makes four major contributions. It 1) articulates a scientific psychology that 2) contributes to social and political emancipation which 3) enhances psychological functioning and fulfillment; and 4) enriches Marxist historical materialism by extending it to encompass human psychology. We have extended Marxist historical materialist concepts to explain, describe, and predict the content, stages, and timing of psychological ontogeny of development of the self. We have also used it to explain the language level of mother-child interactions and the resulting cognitive and linguistic development of children –which reproduces the class structure of the family. We have revealed that it is not only the institutionalized structures of society that are historical-materialist, but the micro-level interactions such as mother-child linguistic communication, and children's moral concepts and interpersonal interactions as well. These are important advances of historical materialism from politics and economics to different orders of psychological phenomena.

Keywords: Historical materialism; Psychological tools; Political-economic system; Culture theory; Social-psychological transformation; Cultural psychology.

Resumen: Vygotski sostuvo que los problemas psicológicos deben definirse, y abordarse, científicamente, en tanto que problemas macro-culturales. La comprensión de los factores histórico-materiales, que organizan los fenómenos psicológicos, permite la emancipación radical de las personas y sociedades. Contrariamente, el esfuerzo por escaparse de la cultura en la subjetividad personal e interpersonal es una libertad ilusoria, además que un análisis no científico de la conducta humana. Destaco cuatro contribuciones de la Psicología histórico-materialista de Vygotski: 1) Articula una psicología científica que 2) contribuye a la emancipación social y política 3) mejorando el funcionamiento psicológico y) enriqueciendo el materialismo histórico de Marx a través de su extensión en la psicología humana. Hemos expandido dicha tradición para explicar, describir y predecir el contenido y períodos del desarrollo ontogenético del yo. Hemos utilizado también dicho marco para comprender el nivel lingüístico en las interacciones madre-hijo/a y su impacto en el desarrollo lingüístico y cognitivo según la estructura de clase social de la familia. Hemos visto que no solamente la estructura institucional de la sociedad es histórica-material, sino también las interacciones micro como la comunicación madre-hijo/a, así como los conceptos morales en los niños y niñas, y las interacciones interpersonales. Se trata de avances relevantes del materialismo histórico desde la economía y la política hacia distintos órdenes de fenómenos psicológicos.

Palabras clave: Materialismo histórico; Instrumentos psicológicos; Sistema político-económico; Teoría cultural; Transformación psicológica-social; Psicología cultural.

Video resumen / video abstract: https://youtu.be/_BjbFxFxVKi5Y

Author: Carl Ratner, Institute for Cultural Research and Education, Trinidad, California, USA. Email: cr2@humboldt1.com

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Proliferating social, ecological, and psychological disasters demand that psychologists make their professional work directly relevant to solving these threats. While many psychologists are engaged in political reforms in their personal lives, their professional work as psychologists has little to say about solving massive disasters which are essentially sociological, political, and economic. Solving disasters means identifying and transforming their underlying causes to emancipate us from disasters. Solving disasters does not mean learning how to live with them and palliate them. Understanding and solving disasters does not mean applying existing psychological theories and constructs to massive problems.

Simply shifting the target of emancipation is insufficient, because existing psychological tools are incapable of comprehending and solving massive, sociological, political, and economic disasters. When applied to disasters they reduce them to familiar psychological notions (about psychobiology, individual psychology, interpersonal psychology, and subjective psychology) which prevent structural, political, economic solutions (Ratner, 2017b). For instance, Phil Hammack, a social psychologist whose research concerns social justice, regards emancipation in subjectivistic, idealist terms: “It is perhaps the rich ability to make meaning, even in settings of injustice, that defeats tyranny” (Hammack, 2011, p. 367). He evidently believes that Nazi tyranny was defeated by its victims having made new meanings about it. The world war that defeated Nazi tyranny does not appear to be relevant.

What is necessary is for Psychology to “grow into” the scale and scope of current disasters. This requires developing new conceptual, analytical, explanatory theories and constructs within the field of Psychology that are capable of addressing levels of reality that psychologists have traditionally ignored. This is what I mean by an emancipatory psychological science.

I propose that Vygotsky’s cultural-historical psychology is a model for us to follow in creating an emancipatory psychological science. Vygotsky’s scientific cultural psychology was informed by a political orientation that sought to emancipate society at its root. Vygotsky said that this emancipatory politics was key to social improvement and psychological enrichment.

Vygotsky’s politics were explicitly Marxist. His psychological theory was also informed by Marxist politics; it was Marxist psychology.

Vygotsky’s Marxist psychology has not been systematically acknowledged and developed by his followers. Therefore, elucidating it has a triple benefit: a) it contributes to human emancipation from crippling disasters which we face today, b) it deepens our understanding of Vygotsky’s psychological theory by elucidating its political **telos**, and c) it deepens our understanding of human psychology.

I have written about Vygotsky’s Marxist politics and how they illuminate his psychological work, as well as elucidating contemporary social and psychological problems and solving them. I have called this exposition and extension of his work “Macro Cultural Psychology” (Ratner, 2012, 2017a; 2019a, 2019b, 2019c, 2019d; 2022; Ratner & Nunes, 2017). This article extends macro cultural psychology in the direction of Vygotsky and beyond toward contemporary social-psychological disasters.

The Internal, Dialectical Integration of Psychological Science and Socio-political Emancipation

I shall first conceptualize the relationship between psychological science and social-political emancipation. I conceptualize it dialectically. Each element interpenetrates the other; stimulates, enriches, and supports the other; forms the other; informs the other; embodies the other; and depends upon the other. A scientific Psychology must be informed with constructs that are useful for social-political emancipation. And emancipatory Psychology must be informed with constructs of scientific Psychology. Psychology is only scientific if it is emancipatory, and Psychology is only emancipatory if it is scientific.

The internal interpenetration of science and emancipation requires an essential unifying character to both. This common character is culture. Culture is central to the nature of psychology and to emancipation. Emancipation is clearly cultural in that emancipation critiques and transforms culture. (A perspective that does not critique and transform culture is not emancipatory. This is true for individualistic, subjectivistic, psychobiological, and psychoanalytic perspectives on human activity and human freedom.) Scientific Psychology is cultural in that it explains psychological phenomena as originating in cultural processes and factors and reproducing them. (Psychological perspectives that do not emphasize culture are not scientific.)

In this internal interpenetration, scientific Psychology — which includes theories, methodologies, research, and interventions such as therapy and educational psychology — will enable people to understand their society as they comprehend their psychology, because psychological phenomena reflect culture. As psychologists research psychology, they will be confronted by cultural factors that stimulate and support and organize psychology. Psychological research will expand our understanding of society, and our ability to critique and improve it. In this way, scientific psychology will be socially emancipatory. Conversely, emancipatory Psychology will sharpen scientific Psychology. Emancipatory Psychology reveals cultural features of psychological phenomena that have been and can be enriched by emancipatory analyses and transformations of culture; these cultural features of psychology enrich the explanatory, descriptive, predictive, and interventionist constructs of scientific (cultural) Psychology.

This dialectical relationship between psychological science and political emancipation is depicted as a mobius strip (see [Figure 1](#)).

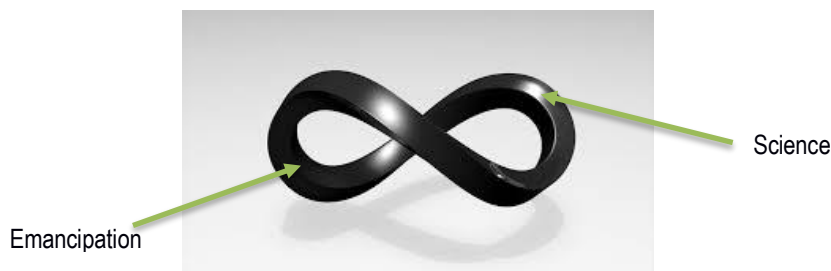


Figure 1. The Scientific-Emancipatory Dialectic of Cultural-Historical Psychology

Cultural psychology reconstitutes the science and the politics of Psychology. It resolves the twin dilemmas (conundrums) of Psychology, namely, 1) its poor scientific quality and 2) its poor political quality. Psychology is weak scientifically because it fails to recognize that psychology is essentially cultural; Psychology is politically weak because it has little to say about the nature of society and the direction that it can be improved. Psychology's scientific weaknesses and its political weaknesses go hand in hand (as a mobius strip); they both stem from avoiding culture. Psychology's withdrawal from serious political contribution incapacitates it from scientifically comprehending psychology's, cultural character; reciprocally, Psychology's aversion to scientific cultural psychology incapacitates it from improving it.

Articulating the scientific and political value of cultural psychology as a mobius strip, or double helix requires a considerable amount of deconstruction and reconstruction of what cultural psychology currently is. For cultural psychology is plagued by diverse, discrepant orientations; it is not a unified, coherent orientation with common constructs, theories, data, conclusions, implications, epistemology, methodology, ontology, direction, or politics. Cultural psychology is a nominal term that connotes an "interest" in "culture," "psychology," and their "relationship." There is no agreed-upon substance to any of these terms. They range from the rigorous, scientific, empirically-grounded, logically-informed, societally-oriented, and politically critical, to the abstruse, speculative, personally-oriented, subjectivistic, and apolitical. Consequently, the scientific and political value of cultural psychology must be ferreted out from this morass of incongruous, contradictory, unscientific, conservative, orientations.

Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Psychology is the Foundation of an Emancipatory, Scientific Psychology

Fortunately, a glimmer of light exists within the morass of cultural psychology that comprises the rudiments of emancipatory scientific Psychology and scientific emancipatory Psychology. Our beacon is the pioneering work of Lev Vygotsky and his close colleagues, Luria and Leontiev. This book invokes this school/approach, known as cultural-historical psychology, as the foundational ontological, epistemological, methodological, and political constructs of an emancipatory, scientific Psychology.

Vygotsky's cultural-historical, psychological constructs are Marxist. Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev were committed Marxists both politically and philosophically (Ratner, 2019d, chap. 3). They were devout believers in socialism as the necessary, fulfilling alternative to class society, and they regarded their psychological research as stimulated by the goal of advancing socialist transformation. They wanted their scientific research to be emancipatory in this sense.

In his essay, *The Historical Meaning of The Crisis in Psychology*, Vygotsky said, "Marxist psychology is not a school amidst schools, but the only genuine psychology as a science... We will work precisely on making our science truthful and to make it agree with Marx's theory."

Vygotsky explains that this entails grounding culture and cultural-psychology in historical-materialist constructs.

Verbal thinking is not a natural but a socio-historical form of behavior. It is therefore characterized by a whole series of features and laws that do not apply to natural forms of thinking and speech and intellect as it occurs in the animal world and the earliest states of childhood. The most important point, however, is that this recognition of the historical nature of verbal thinking requires that in analyzing it we apply the same methodological theses that historical materialism applies to the other historical phenomena of human society. We can anticipate that the basic features of the historical development of behavior in this domain will be directly dependent on the general laws that govern the historical development of human society (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 120, my emphasis)

Vygotsky additionally said, "Already in primitive societies...the entire psychological makeup of individuals can be seen to depend directly on the development, the degree of development of the production forces, and on the structure of that social group to which the individual belongs...Both of these factors, whose intrinsic interdependence has been established by the theory of historical materialism, are the decisive factors of the whole psychology of primitive man" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 176).

And again, "Like history, sociology is in need of the intermediate special theory of historical materialism which explains the concrete meaning for the given group of phenomena of the abstract laws of dialectical materialism. In exactly the same way, we are in need of an as yet undeveloped but inevitable theory of psychological materialism as an intermediate science which explains the concrete application of the abstract theses of dialectical materialism to the given field of phenomena" (Vygotsky, 1997a, pp. 330-331).

These are all pregnant statements about constructing a model for historical-materialist/cultural-historical Psychology. These statements reveal what culture and history mean for Vygotsky. Culture and history are not abstract activities such as shared customs and meanings that "humans" create and recreate. An abstract sense of culture and history implies that culture and history are democratically constructed by members of a localized group to express their interests. It ignores power differences, economic differences, social forces, social conditions, social contradictions and social dynamics of oppression and alienation. It also ignores concrete interests of the dominant group and the concrete practices they arrange to realize their interests — e.g., the interest of the capitalist class in accumulating capital by extracting surplus value from the work of employees.

Historical materialism is Vygotsky's cultural psychology. It expands and concretizes traditional cultural psychology by grounding culture and psychology in concrete historical materialist factors and processes that are rooted in the political economy. Vygotsky extends historical materialism to encompass psychological phenomena,

and also the discipline of Psychology that studies psychological phenomena. Historical-materialist Psychology/cultural-historical Psychology is emancipatory psychological science (Ratner 2012, 2019a, b, c, d; 2022).

I argue that **Vygotsky's work was designed to articulate a model for justifying and directing research into cultural-historical/historical-materialist psychology.** This was the Marxist psychological theory that he sought to develop under the name psychological materialism. Much of his empirical research was indicative and illustrative of the main principles of this theory and its application to diverse psychological phenomena. His research was not a conclusive corpus of data on particular topics. His research was more a Marxist psychological theory that could serve as the epistemè that generates emancipatory, scientific findings. Vygotsky sought to explain why this research was necessary and possible. His explanation was rooted in the cultural historical nature of psychological phenomena and emancipation. As he stated earlier, "We can anticipate that the basic features of the historical development of behavior will be directly dependent on the general laws that govern the historical development of human society." This is a general theory of the nature of human psychology that justified and demanded researching historical-materialist aspects of particular psychological phenomena.

One of Vygotsky's most powerful contributions to bringing historical-materialism to bear on human psychology was his insight that the psychological tools which form human psychology are historical-materialist, macro cultural factors such as social institutions, cultural values, and cultural artifacts (Ratner, 2019d, p. 75; Kozulin, 2001). This brings historical materialism directly into the psyche as its constituents or tools that compose and operate psychology. Macro cultural factors generate the mind and permeate it. That is what makes us cultural beings who share language, concepts, values, ideals, perceptions, emotions, and cognitions. Examples of macro cultural psychological tools are advertisements, news programs, schools-education, and private property. These structure what we know, how we think, what we desire, what we dislike, and how we treat people.

This construct of psychological tools supersedes, displaces, or subsumes the myriad psychological mechanisms that other psychologists have postulated. The hegemony of non-historical-materialist psychological mechanisms over the history of Psychology makes Vygotsky's psychological tools appear to be incomprehensible, impossible, and even defamatory – just as Galileo's astronomy appeared to the Catholic Church, and just as Darwin's evolution raises alarm amongst Muslim and Christian fundamentalists. Consequently, it is necessary to illustrate what psychological tools are and how they operate.

Examples of Cultural-Historical/Historical-Materialist Psychology

Echelbarger, Gelman, & Kalish (2019) documented how economic market norms are psychological tools which children use to regulate their interpersonal interactions. In one experiment, children reciprocated with others according to how much their partners offered them. Children did not distribute goods equally to all partners equally, nor did they give goods to those who needed them but could not pay. This principle of exchange seeks to receive the most value for the least expenditure, or a given expenditure. This is the principle of capitalist market exchange. It is what drives Amazon to drive its warehouse employees to stock and pick and pack items every 11 seconds – which requires them to circumvent safety instructions that would slow them down and result in their firing -- so that employees can offer high "reciprocity" for their standard compensation. (One week, an Amazon employee was hitting 98.45% of his expected productivity/speed rate, but that 1.55% productivity shortfall earned him a written warning.)

Maximizing profitable exchanges is evidenced in businesses that raise their prices during a disaster when demand is high, so that businesses can maximize their revenue for fixed costs (for labor and inventory) that they paid before the disaster. This market principle is also manifested in companies firing old employees and hiring young ones at a lower cost. This generates the same productivity for a lower wage. The human toll on older employees who need to support their families of children and elderly parents is never a factor in employment decisions that are entirely based upon profit maximization. Similarly, ignored is the toll on poor people who cannot obtain needed goods during a disaster when prices are increased. These capitalist market norms of equity come to define morality and fairness in the minds of children.¹

Importantly, children learn to adopt market economic values as they age. “Children increasingly incorporated market norms into their interpersonal distributions with age” (ibid., p. 2071). The oldest children and adults distributed more goods to those offering more payment (i.e. more benefit to the provider of goods) than to others who wanted to pay but could not afford to.

This example demonstrates that **the ontogenetic development of psychological functions (e.g., cognitions and emotions about justice) is a longitudinal process of internalizing historical-materialist psychological tools (e.g., market economics)**. Psychological ontogenetic development is a process of **enculturation into society**; it is not a natural sequence of psychobiological stages (Ratner, 1998).

Vygotsky articulated this clearly:

In contrast to the maturation of instincts or innate tendencies, the motive force that sets in action the maturational mechanism of behavior impelling it forward along the path of further development is located not inside but outside the adolescent. The tasks that are posed for the maturing adolescent by the social environment – tasks that are associated with his entry into the cultural, professional, and social life of the adult world – are an essential functional factor in the formation of concepts (cited in Ratner, 2019d pp. 61-62)

Because concepts are central to all human psychological functioning according to Vygotsky, he is saying that all psychology is generated by the cultural, professional, and social life of the adult world. This opens the ontogeny of psychological functions to historical-materialist considerations. These include both the character of cultural psychological tools (e.g., market economics) which organize our psychological functions, and the **ontogenetic process** by which this cultural organization takes place. The stages, levels, and timing of ontogenesis is a function of the stages, levels, and timing of enculturation of psychological tools and tasks that accompany the timing, stages, intensity, and comprehensiveness of entry into the cultural, professional, and social life of the adult world, as Vygotsky put it. Children’s exposure to market exchange practices, for example, is determined by these practices enter children’s families, schools, entertainment, and recreation, and also how pervasively or comprehensively they do so – i.e., how much leeway they grant to other cultural factors and processes. This determines the content of children’s morality, justice, and interpersonal interactions, and the longitudinal timing of their development. All of this is a function of social structure, politics, and economics and varies with the structure. This constitutes **the historical-materialist ontogeny of psychological functions**.

This ontogeny of psychological functions is a **function** of the political-economic development of a society; it is also a **measure** of the political-economic development of society. Ontogeny is a window into society that exposes society’s character – e.g., its predominant social forms and contents, as well as their pervasiveness in social life -- via its psychological affects across the life span.

Sociologist Daniel Cook (2004) explores these historical-materialist details of psychological ontogeny, which the foregoing study indicates in broad strokes. Cook explains how children’s psychological ontogeny is systematically structured through the commercial categorizing of age-graded clothing designs. Parents use this ontogeny of clothing to frame their children’s psychological ontogenetic stages.

For example, “In 1936 the ‘toddler’ **as a commercial persona or construct** began to take shape.” “The term ‘toddler’ began to be used with great frequency as a size range and as a merchandising category [of clothing], and soon after, as an age-stage designation” (ibid., p. 86, emphasis added). “Commercial interests and concerns coalesce and interact to essentially institutionalize a new category of person and new phase of the life course” (ibid., p. 85). “Markets and market mechanisms are inseparable from the historical process of elevating the child to more inclusive levels of personhood” (ibid., p. 68).

American clothing merchants in the 1920s and 30s promoted the idea of age-graded clothing. Before this time, infants’ and children’s clothing was disbursed throughout numerous store departments whose items were associated

with wearing particular articles of clothing. Socks were in one area, underwear in another area, etc. It took a revolution in merchandising to collect all clothing articles in one department where they could be age-graded in particular displays.

The new spatializing of merchandising performed an important psychological function. It abstracted the child from particular cultural activities such as farming, and replaced these maturational sign posts with new ones that were designed by commercial clothing manufacturers to maximize sales and profits. For example, farm children worked on the farm continuously across their life spans, with little need for changes in clothing design other than larger sizes as children grew up. Once clothing was conceptually divorced from physical measures of growth and particular age-graded work activities, it could be graded according to criteria that were contrived by manufacturers' profit motives. Manufacturers exploited this opportunity by re-designing children's clothing into numerous, short-lived stages. They induced parents and children to crave to buy new clothes at each stage. This generated great sales and profits.

Commercially designed children's clothing became the social criterion, and the subjective identity, of children's maturational stages. Delay in assuming the appropriate dress design was claimed to be emotionally frustrating and psychologically damaging for children. Outmoded clothing would retard psychological development because peers and teachers -- and the child herself -- would treat the child according to the younger styles that she wore. This incentivized children to desire fast maturity with all the new consumption each stage demanded. Older girls, for example could/should purchase make-up, jewelry, hair styling, and more stylish clothing. Manufacturers therefore invented such things as the "beginning bra" for preteens in the 1950s, for girls who in previous generations had never worn it and did not need it. This induced an early desire for this article of clothing, but even beyond the bra it encouraged a preteen social identity that craved teenage physically-enhancing products of all kinds. Early sexualization of girls is a byproduct of this bodily commodification via commercial beauty products.

While clothing merchants said they were simply designing clothes to meet the natural developmental stages and needs of the child, they actually cultivated the child's stages and needs to meet their economic demand for profit. The "beginning bra" and "tween" make-up and clothing demonstrate that clothing stages were not generated by psychobiological stages.

Psychological stages conformed to the distinctions that were displayed in clothing styles (*ibid.*, p. 97). Clothing became a psychological tool that children utilize to form their identities over their lifespan. Children's clothing was a commercial, commodified psychological tool that entered children's psyches according to political-economic considerations that marked/defined the life span. This is the historical-materialist ontogenesis of children's self-concept.

This example and the previous example of children's interpersonal exchanges illustrate that the content and the number of levels/stages of ontological development, as well as their timing, duration, and dominance, recapitulate political-economic practices. (Of course, the psychological maturation of infants and children is also constrained by psychobiological mechanisms, however, these increasingly are replaced by cultural-historical mechanisms, which are **not continuous with psychobiological mechanisms**, as Vygotsky repeatedly emphasized).

While the examples demonstrate the essential elements of psychological formation by macro cultural factors, the fact is that most instances of psychological formation are more complex than these examples. Most macro cultural psychology involves some mediation of the essential elements by interpersonal interactions. Family interactions are among the most important mediations of macro cultural factors (such as market exchange and clothing design and merchandising) and psychology. These must be included in a historical-materialist account of psychology. Indeed, they refine this account to make it more nuanced and accurate. We will therefore present one example of this interpersonal mediation of macro cultural psychology within the rubric of historical-materialist, cultural-historical, macro-cultural Psychology.

We shall consider children's cognitive and linguistic functioning which are a function of their parents' language level. This is often regarded as contradicting macro cultural psychology. However, parents' language use is a function of

their social class practices. This means that children's cognitive-linguistic performance is ultimately a function of their social class. Parents transmit or mediate social class to children via their linguistic interactions.

Daneri, Blair and Kuhn (2019) articulate this relationship in a masterful piece of research. "Importantly, maternal language mediates the relation between SES disparities and child vocabulary" (ibid., p. 2002). Specifically, class shapes the language level of mothers -- their variety of words, length of sentences, complexity of grammar -- which then shapes the cognitive and linguistic development of their children -- their vocabulary development, object category formation, reasoning skills, reflection, integrating information, working memory, shifting attention, and representational thinking. Maternal dialogue with children is a proxy for social class. It is the interpersonal agent or tool of class formation of children's psychology. Language is a historical-materialist phenomenon (shaped by social class) that transmits historical-materialist social relations to micro level interactions and psychological competencies. (Bronfenbrenner depicted micro social relations in this way; see Ratner, 1991, pp. 172-173).

This relationship has been documented by sociolinguist Basil Bernstein. He emphasizes the ways that classed language competencies (i.e., linguistic capital) adjusts children to their designated class position in which they were raised (Ratner, 2019d, pp. 80-83). This is what all psychological tools do because they primarily originate in, reflect, and reproduce historical-materialist factors.² Psychological ontogenesis becomes the social-political-economic processes that determine the timing, the completeness, and the acceptance of particular psychological tools (e.g., linguistic codes, market exchange, clothing styles) into children's social environments (their entry into the adult world, as Vygotsky said) and children's psyches.

Micro level mediations complicate, broaden, and insinuate macro cultural factors in daily life. Mediations actually make macro cultural factors more dominate in these forms. The construct of mediations draws a vast network of social and psychological (and biological) issues together under the governance of macro cultural factors – or historical-materialist factors – which the mediations transmit to people as "capillaries of power" (to use Foucault's term). Mediations are not independent practices that are invented within the family through interpersonal or psychobiological processes that are external to society and interact with it. Family activities are the system mediating itself through its attributes in particular domains (such as the family) that the system generates. Zones of proximal development must be recognized as part of this system.

This relationship among social levels means that the micro-interpersonal level cannot be treated as free and independent. It does not produce psychological effects by itself. And it cannot alter psychological effects by itself. Psychological problems cannot be corrected in the family alone, because they are ultimately generated by broader macro cultural factors. Family interventions do not eliminate negative macro cultural factors which bear on parents and children. Thorough correction of psychological problems requires improving macro cultural factors. Micro-level actors must learn to develop new cultural form and content to their interactions which they simultaneously implement on the macro cultural level through social-political engagement.

The Emancipatory Power of Cultural-Historical/ Historical-Materialist Psychological Science

Drawing psychological phenomena and psychological development into historical-materialist processes, factors, and dynamics is the historical-materialist science of psychology that Vygotsky pioneered. This science passes into the emancipatory politics of psychology, as the mobius strip depicts. Historical-materialist processes, factors, and dynamics include social contradictions, which generate social critique, and provide social requirements for social transformation, and also provide social possibilities of achieving social transformation.

If we condemn the cruel ways that children treat each other, as they favor the amount of money their friends can offer them over the human need that their friends have for various things, we can trace this to the economic market of advanced capitalism that pervades the lives of young children in our particular social system, and we can utilize this critique to transform that market economy (Brown, 2019 describes this process in the proliferation of political authoritarianism that she traces to neoliberal political-economy).

The same holds for the forced, artificial, frenetic, plying of commodified identities on children which Cook documents. Eradicating this syndrome requires eradicating capitalist control over products and marketing, as well as an end to the profit motive that conjured up commercial form and content to psychological tools of human development. Cognitive deficiencies in working class children will similarly be traced to oppressive class features which structure mothers' linguistic interactions with their children. Parents, children, educators, and psychologists must use this critique to reorganize the class structure and its micro level expressions in their behavior, into democratic, collective social relations.³

Vygotsky believed that psychological problems are rooted in social problems of capitalism which are ultimately rooted in its political economy, and can only be solved by eradicating their political economic basis and transforming it into a socialist political economy. Vygotsky adopted Marx's political philosophy (Ratner, 2019d, chapter 3). He brought socialist transformation to bear on solving psychological issues. This is the emancipatory helix of Vygotsky's theory that intertwines with the scientific helix to form a double helix of emancipatory, scientific Psychology.

Vygotsky provides a clear example of historical-materialist/cultural-historical ontology, epistemology, methodology, culture theory, cultural psychology. He says that "the source of the degradation of the personality lies in the capitalist form of manufacturing. [This psychology] cannot be resolved without the destruction of the capitalist system organization of industry...by the socialist revolution." "Alongside this process, a change in the human personality and an alteration of man himself must inevitably take place." "Collectivism, the unification of intellectual and physical labor, a change in the relationship between the sexes, the abolition of the gap between physical and intellectual development, these are the key aspects of that alteration of man which is the subject of our discussion" (Vygotsky, 1994, pp. 180-182).

Elevating psychology — the degradation of personality — to the macrosphere of historical materialist conditions, forces, and dynamics – e.g., capitalist manufacturing – is a) new scientific understanding of personality/personality degradation in terms of macro cultural factors that generate it, organize it, operate it, and require it; and b) renders personality a force for socially critiquing and transforming society which degrades personality.

Psychology can only be improved by improving the society that forms and informs it; and this transformation follows historical-materialist dynamics as outlined by Marx. Personality can only be improved by improving/transforming the capitalist industrialization that forms personality.

This process depends upon the dynamics of capitalism – its problems, contradictions, and viable possibilities for negation. This is clear in Vygotsky's call for socialist collectivism and socialist labor and socialist gender relations as the solution to personality degradation. Psychological fulfillment is not a matter of personal change or wishful change.⁴

This is illustrated in **Figure 2**. It traces a psychological phenomenon, personality degradation, to historical-materialist factors of capitalist industry and then follows the principles of historical materialism to transform capitalism to socialism which is the solution to more fulfilling personalities.

This example demonstrates how scientific cultural-historical/historical-materialist/macro-cultural Psychology is psychologically fulfilling by being socially and politically emancipatory.

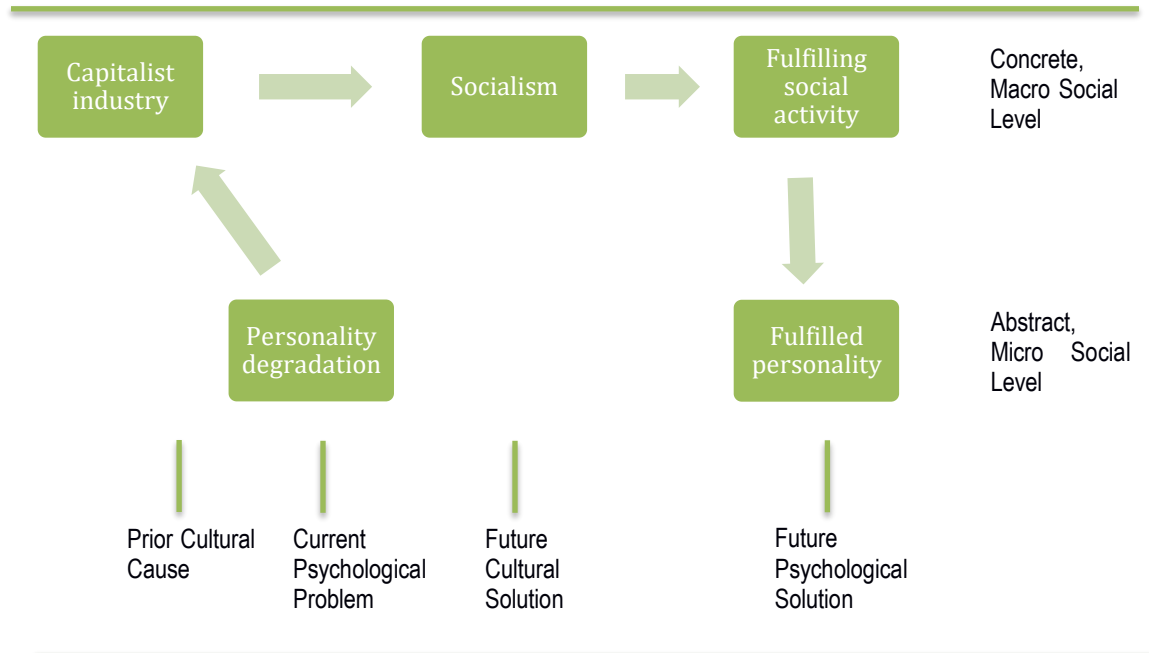


Figure 2. Vygotsky's Emancipatory Cultural-Historical Psychology

Emancipation is the built-in intentionality of scientific research

The emancipatory politics of historical-materialism are rooted in its scientific analysis of culture and psychology. In other words, its scientific analysis lead to transforming the political-economic base of society as the way to emancipate people from problems and find fulfillment. Psychological phenomena must be cultural in order for them to be emancipatory. For only if they reflect culture do they contain the possibility of critiquing culture (from culture's psychological effects) and ultimately transforming culture. Non-cultural psychological phenomena have neither of these powers to contribute to social change.

Conversely, the fact that social transformation is the most powerful solution to problems and to finding fulfillment led Vygotsky to adopt historical materialism as the scientific framework for cultural psychology. He looked for deep political-economic causes of culture and psychology because these causes provided the necessity and the possibility of comprehensive, deep emancipation. He eschewed circumscribed, superficial causes of psychology (such as personal and interpersonal activities) because they do not provide the necessity and possibility of political-economic transformation/liberation. Historical-materialist emancipation was built into Vygotsky's historical-materialist science, just as the science was built into emancipation. Historical-materialist emancipation was the intentionality of Vygotsky's scientific research; it was not a mere by-product (after thought) of his research.

Rebutting Scientific and Political Attacks on the Theory

Cultural-historical/historical-materialist psychological theory is unique in dialectically integrating psychological science and social-political emancipation in a logical fashion that advances both. To preserve the integrity and value of this powerful double helix, Vygotsky protected it from dilution by contradictory constructs. This dilution occurs by postulating an "interaction" of cultural factors with natural, psychobiological, or personal factors. This reduces the impact of historical-materialist, macro cultural factors on psychology; and it reduces the power of psychology (and Psychology) to expose, critique, and transform those factors. Non-historical-materialist factors and processes impede the emancipatory and scientific power of Vygotsky's theory (see Ratner & Nunes, 2017; Ratner, 2019d, chap. 6).

Naturalistic Mechanisms

To counter these obstacles, Vygotsky levelled numerous critiques of naturalistic explanations of psychology. Earlier we cited Vygotsky's statement that "In contrast to the maturation of instincts or innate tendencies, the motive force that sets in action the maturational mechanism of behavior impelling it forward along the path of further development is located not inside but outside the adolescent." Vygotsky similarly levelled strong criticisms of efforts to advance Marxist psychology with psychoanalytic constructs such as Eros, Thanatos, libido, and hydraulic notions of repression, projection, and reaction formation. These constructs are not historical-materialist and they therefore compromise the scientific and political value of historical-materialist Psychology when they are conjoined with it (Ratner, 2017a; Ratner, 2019d, chap. 6)). Freud used psychoanalytical constructs to deny his female patients' historically-conditioned experiences of sexual abuse in historical, patriarchal family systems, and to misinterpret it as a loving experience with the perpetrators. Erich Fromm (1978) corrected this error by informing psychoanalytic constructs with historical-materialist content. He called this "analytical social psychology": "Analytical social psychology seeks to understand the instinctual apparatus of a group...in terms of its socio-economic structure....The family, all its internal emotional relationships and the educational ideals it embodies, are conditioned by the social and class background of the family...The family is the psychological agency of society" (p.483). This encompasses all cultural and psychological phenomena within the conceptual rubric of historical-materialism.

Personal Processes

The same thinking led Vygotsky and his colleagues to encompass personal issues within historical materialism. He rejected a "person-centric" approach to psychology, according to which psychology is a personal construct invented by individual agency, expressive of individual agency, and fulfilled by agency. Vygotsky (1997a, pp. 274, 271) said this as follows: "For psychology, the need to fundamentally transcend the boundaries of immediate experience is a matter of life and death." **Figure 3** depicts the impossibility of improving psychology directly on the psychological level, indicated by the red arrow.

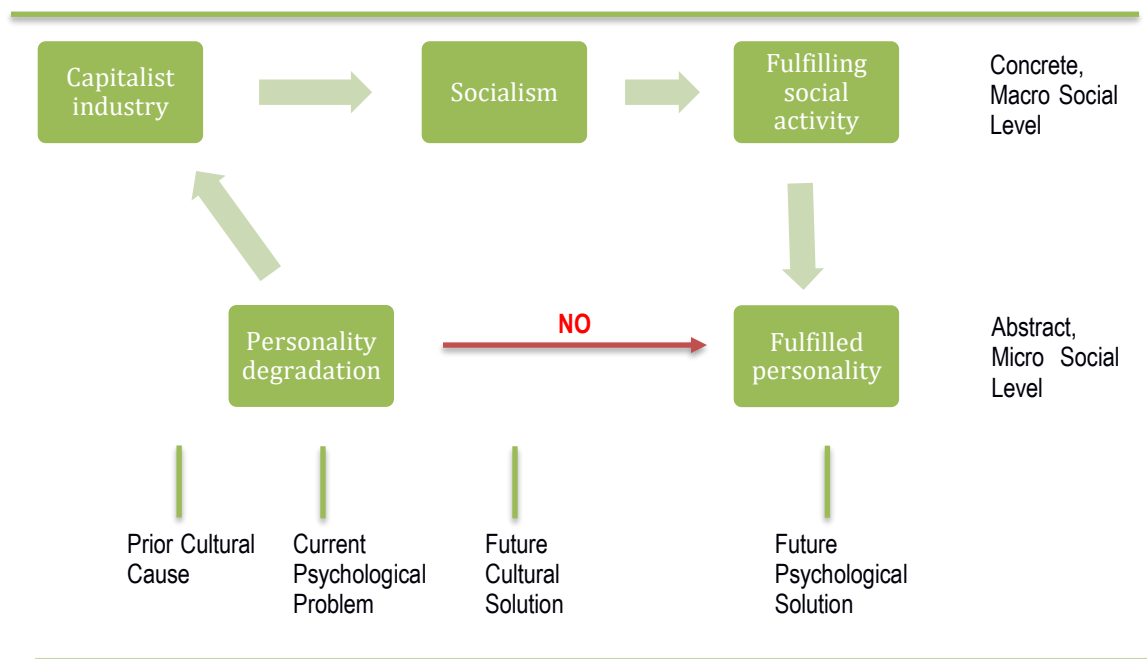


Figure 3. Vygotsky's Emancipatory Cultural-Historical Psychology Vs. Psychological Interventions

The red arrow indicates the individualistic, interpersonal solution to psychological problems. I call this “micro cultural psychology” and also “populist cultural psychology” (Ratner, 2019d). The emphasis is on the standpoint of the subject in creating and enacting meanings which select, reject, and interpret social phenomena. Social phenomena have no power to direct or constrain individual agency. Social phenomena are simply stimuli that subjects can use as they wish. This enables individuals to achieve their own fulfillment.

Valsiner & van der Veer adopt this orientation in their statement that “The horizon is **indeterminate** – it looks as if it is a contour, but it is only our ego-centered construction.” “The objective of human development is the establishment of autonomy as an acting person.” Gonzalez-Rey similarly declares, “the subject is **always singular and grounded in his or her own subjective configurations.**” Tateo similarly dissipates culture into an abstraction, devoid of meaning, substance, and influence, so that it can always be interpreted and acted on as the individual wishes. He says: “We must be aware of the fact that we basically work with a non-existing object. ‘Culture’ is one of those world/word that indicates an archipelago of meaningful human activities” (all cited in Ratner, 2019c, pp 410-412). Tateo dissolves objective, obvious, obdurate, organized cultural factors and systems -- such as slavery, neoliberalism, fascism, Islam, Chinese capitalism, economic austerity, commodities, capital, and aristocratic upper class -- into indefinite, disparate, small-scale, intentional human activities that are always open to direct, individual, interpersonal negotiation. Micro cultural psychologists deny the emergent, organized, holistic, massive, enduring, powerful, institutional, quality of human activities – which are central to human accomplishments and fulfillment (e.g., universities, hospitals, industries, mass transportation systems).

Suicide

This social philosophy is incapable of understanding and improving human activity which is historical-materialist. This can be seen in the escalating crisis in American suicides. According to the *Los Angeles Times* of June 28, 2019, youth suicides (15-24 years old) in 2017 were 14.6 per 100,000, the highest on record. Young men between 15 and 19 killed themselves at a rate of 17.9 per 100,000, up from 13 per 100,000 in 2000. The Center for Disease Control reported that an average American’s **likelihood of dying by suicide** at any given age rose 33% between 1999 and 2017. Suicide is now said to be the second leading cause of death for Americans between 10 and 34. The CDC has noted that in 2017, suicide rates in the country’s most rural counties were 80% higher than they were in large metropolitan counties. Across the country, rising rates of suicide, fatal drug overdoses and deaths due to alcohol abuse have collectively driven up the average American’s probability of dying at any age. In recent years, these so-called “**deaths of despair**” have also reduced the average life expectancy of Americans. “By many measures, teens and young adults have become more depressed over the past decade and suffered higher levels of psychological distress than their predecessors.”

This broad demographic of suicide, that has escalated in this 21st century, can only be caused by broad, central, cultural factors that are increasingly oppressive and dehumanizing. This massive, escalating demographic cannot be caused by scattered, individual and interpersonal acts, coincidentally occurring at the same time. Mass suicide and despair also cannot be eradicated through individual interventions that ignore the massive, societal, political, economic, cultural, and ecological factors that cause suicide.

Yet the *Times* article ignores macro cultural factors as causative of suicide and as the necessary target of transformation to cure suicide. The article suggests instead, that “Parents, teachers and peers should be particularly attentive to the distress of teens and young adults” and point them to suicide telephone hotlines for interpersonal treatment.

Masculinity

The scientific and practical inadequacies of the populist, liberal, micro, social philosophy are more fully revealed in its explanation and treatment of negative aspects of contemporary masculinity. (This is called “toxic masculinity,” which is a sexist slur that would cause outrage if applied to women -- as in “toxic femininity” or “toxic homosexuality”). This

philosophy regards toxic masculinity as treatable by altering personal acts to become more communicative, emotional, expressive, and considerate. Serious, concrete social transformation is never considered – despite the fact that it is indicated by a cultural-historical/historical-materialist/macro-cultural psychological analysis.

Swanson (2019) articulates and critiques the populist, micro-level approach that he witnessed in men's workshops. One workshop was organized by Evryman. Swanson explains that Evryman emphasizes somatic awareness to express their "softer," feeling, communicative, and cooperative side. "Turn the feeling lever up," Blaine (a facilitator) commands at one point. "And turn the thinking lever down." The linchpin of the Evryman program is something called the ROC method, which stands for "relax, open up, and connect." "To relax, we perform a brief meditation because, as men, we've supposedly been inculcated with the belief that we should muzzle our pain as a means of proving our toughness. What this weekend will offer is a chance to open the spigot of those emotions" (p. 26). One facilitator yells out "Let your body do what it wants.. Nothing is wrong here. Make noise. Get primal!" "Now the men become loudly unglued. There are ferocious growls and unbridled sobs, anguished shrieks and boyish gasps. It sounds Dantean in its anger and pain." "The man to my right is sobbing inconsolably, his limbs tangled in a fetal position, and he's rocking back and forth in a lost, desolate way, his face violet with woe" (p. 31).

Another person-centric technique to encourage men to express their "softer," feeling, communicative, and cooperative side is to wander around the main hall, gazing into the eyes of the men who are present. Another exercise involves telling other participants one's inner secrets,. For example, Adam confesses "If you really knew me, you'd know that I've never had any friends, that I've never wanted any. If you really knew me, you'd know that I recently came out as gay, that I've had sex with over four hundred men, that last October I tried to commit suicide after I confessed everything to my wife" (p. 26).

Swanson correctly states that these personal and interpersonal strategies ignore macro cultural/historical materialist bases of masculinity. Contemporary masculinity is not a natural or universal attribute. Swanson explains that up until the end of the nineteenth century, the ideal of American masculinity was communal. The historian Rotundo has observed that the masculinity of the colonial era was not defined by chest-thumping machismo or brawny, entrepreneurial pluck, but was measured instead by a man's willingness to forfeit his time and resources for the betterment of his community. This was not a matter of "emotional intelligence." Rather, men's duties were fulfilled through "public usefulness." Often this led to nascent forms of mutual aid, because in a world where "creditors were neighbors and kinsmen were clients, a man's failure at work was never a private concern." Those colonial men who saddled up and lit out for the territories were roundly condemned as "frontier wastrels," as the historian Vernon Louis Parrington called them. They were condemned as princes of thoughtlessness who pursued their own agendas and roamed the country as they pleased (ibid., pp. 27-28). The popular notion that contemporary masculinity is natural and universal, and encompassed colonial men (as portrayed in the lonesome swagger of John Wayne, the gruff reticence of the cowboy), is a product of fictionalized accounts of the frontier.

Swanson explains that modern masculinity is a product of capitalist industrialization. Capitalism demanded and rewarded attributes that colonial communities (operating on a pre-capitalist political economy) were prone to denigrate: aggression, guile, and an overwhelming will to power. A historical-materialist account of masculinity thus reveals it to be a social critique of capitalism; masculinity is not an essential attribute of men that impugns men.

This historical-materialist account adds that when men failed to thrive in the capitalist marketplace, they compensated by adopting social forms of masculinity in exaggerated expressions in their personal lives. The feminist scholar Joseph Pleck notes that during the Great Depression men no longer had opportunities for the sorts of external achievements that once granted them real, successful virility— such as wartime brawn or financial independence. So they retreated to personal, psychological and behavioral expressions to restore their sense of male identity. They engaged in heavy drinking, coarse language, and prurience to express aggressive, competitive, egotistical, bourgeois masculinity. This is the "freedom" of the personal realm which is only "free" because it is marginalized, isolated, and irrelevant. The freedom of the exaggerated personal realm is really oppressive because it is irrelevant to real accomplishment and fulfillment in the social world. This has continued and exacerbated in blue-collar workplaces during the decades-long reign of neoliberalism (Ratner, 2019d, chap. 7).

Men's contemporary conflicts with women are equally driven by oppressive, competitive capitalism. "In *Backlash*, her mammoth history of antifeminism, Susan Faludi notes that the antagonism toward women in the 1980s coincided with lackluster growth of traditionally male industries, causing a precipitous drop in real wages for households in which a man was the sole breadwinner. In describing this era, she writes, 'The 1980s was a decade in which plant closings put blue-collar men out of work by the millions, and only 60 percent found new jobs—about half at lower pay' (p. 28).

Thus, it was increasingly debilitating forms of capitalism that generated debilitating, extreme, exaggerated, irrational, crude, violent, personal forms of masculinity. Debilitating masculinity reflects and implicates debilitating capitalism, and calls for capitalism's transformation.

Contemporary populists and feminists generally ignore these points as they put the onus on male psychobiology and agency (toxic masculinity) which must be severely punished. Swanson explains how men in men's groups have internalized this shaming and blaming of the male psyche, apart from historical-materialist factors. "Whereas the male liberationists of the 1960s and '70s were inspired by second-wave feminism to interrogate the ways in which modern masculinity was socially constructed, both by the imperatives of Madison Avenue and the fiat of consumer capitalism, today's men's movement tends to focus on emotional intelligence... (p. 26).

Shifting the causes and treatments of destructive masculinity away from historical-materialist conditions that generate debilitating features of masculinity to men's psychobiology and agency, negates the social critique of capitalism that masculinity implicitly contains (see Ratner, 2019d, chaps. 4, 5) for additional analysis of "toxic masculinity"). There is thus no reason to transform historical-materialist factors and dynamics. Men must simply change their psychology from macho/sexist to becoming good communicators and social partners.

This leaves existing conditions free to generate personality problems of men (and women). Individualistic, psychobiological, and interpersonal interventions perpetuate the psychological problems that they are intended to resolve.

Transcending alienation

I have explained that psychological emancipation must be scientific (just as psychological science must be emancipatory). Psychological emancipation must take account of the objective causes and characteristics of psychological phenomena. Emancipation must concretely negate those objective causes and characteristics. Social and psychological emancipation cannot emanate from wishes and abstract ideals.

Psychological science reveals that psychology is culturally organized. This scientific fact stipulates how psychological and social emancipation can and cannot be achieved. It cannot be achieved through individual self-expression and interpersonal communication and decision-making. For these reproduce social forces and psychological tools that formed them. This factual nature of psychology requires that psychological and social emancipation must be achieved by comprehending and negating the real, obdurate historical-materialist, macro factors that oppress and mystify psychology. Vygotsky explained this in relation to psychological degradation which requires transformation of capitalist industry into socialism.

An outstanding empirical demonstration of this principle is Huang & Lin's (2019) research on internet communication groups in a Chinese school. Government agencies and school officials encouraged parents to use a social internet service WeChat (similar to Facebook which is banned in China) to become more involved in school activities concerning their children. Parents formed internet links with each other and with teachers. This was assumed to enhance grassroots democratic participation of parents in school, as well as community building among parents who did not regularly meet each other in person. However, this was not the actual result of the social networking. The result was that "people performing their activities on SNSs are inevitably intertwined with certain values and beliefs in

accordance with their social status” (ibid., p. 489). This class organization of neutral communication technology infused it with different class-based and class-oriented competencies and purposes; this produced a digital divide among parents from different social classes in their social network use. Digital communication did not overcome social inequalities; it reproduced them. “The middle-class parents played the leading role in the WeChat group and took an interventionist approach in educational involvement and, by comparison, their working-class peers were mainly positioned in a marginalised place and presented largely as absent participants” (ibid, p. 493).

For example, “Middle-class parents in this study tended to commit to prioritising their child’s educational goals. They constantly tracked their children’s progress at school and intervened when problems arose.” [In contrast,] “In general, working-class parents presented much less than their advantaged counterparts on WeChat, which suggests that they have less opportunity to build connections with teachers and to establish rapport with other parents. They seemed to scatter without cohesion around the pivotal ‘circle of friends’ formed predominantly by middle-class parents and remained silent there. Their experience of educational involvement via WeChat was relatively ‘thin’.” “Unlike their advantaged peers who took an interventionist approach, the working-class parents never scrutinised or challenged the teachers in reference to their own expected norms.

They also tended to feel less welcomed to participate in school affairs.” “Disadvantaged parents were constrained by multiple barriers, i.e., lack of time, skills, knowledge or other resources, in using WeChat for their educational involvement. In these extracurricular events presented in the WeChat group, working-class parents were also less likely to interact with their children than their middle-class counterparts. Notably, they have been largely excluded from building a collaborative relationship and having effective interaction with the teachers and other parents.” “Working class cashier Duan did not join other parents’ discussion on ‘happy education’. She made the point later in the interview: ‘We use our hands to earn money. ... We make a living in a distinct way from that of rich people. You know, they use their brains [to earn money].’ As such, she felt it unworthy of expressing herself in the WeChat group.” “Working class parents felt a sense of being othered and chose to escape themselves from the WeChat group, as illustrated in taxi-driver’s Long’s words: ‘I’d better to be absent’” (pp. 495-498).

This excellent research confirms cultural-historical/macro-cultural Psychology’s principle that subjectivity is organized by macro cultural, historical-materialist factors and processes (psychological tools). When people are afforded opportunities to express their subjectivities – as in utilizing neutral internet media in populist, democratic activities – what they express is their cultural psychology (habitus) which reproduces their social conditions that formed their psychology (see Ratner, 2019d for extended critique of populist emancipation).

Foucault called this “governmentality,” by which he meant that contemporary, neoliberal capitalist societies govern their citizens by organizing their subjectivities (habitus) so that the people reproduce society spontaneously in their individual, “free” activities such as using the internet for educational and social purposes. **Governmentality is culturally organized psychology (macro cultural psychology) that guides behavior in socially normative (and socially functional) directions. Macro cultural psychology is governmentality in this sense of guiding socially normative, socially functional behavior – which is often not functional for individual fulfillment.**

The Chinese internet users exemplified this duality. Their normative, class behavior was implemented by their voluntary, agentive use of WeChat which was governed by their culturally organized psychology/subjectivity. The parents were not instructed or controlled by external authorities to use the internet as they did.

The fact that existing subjectivity/psychology is governed by macro cultural factors makes it incapable of emancipating people from their class position and behavior. This principle recapitulates other forms of governance – political, economic, educational, religious, recreational – which also cannot be improved by working within their parameters.

Emancipation requires analyzing and negating oppressive macro cultural/historical-materialist factors. Economic oppression can only be eradicated by objectively transforming economic social relations of ownership, work,

financialization, etc. in economically viable, alternative directions. It cannot be eradicated by workers expressing their existing opinions about incomes and work.

The same is true for educational oppression. Oppressive, class-based, and class-functional educational practices must be objectively identified and systematically changed in ways that specifically target their class basis and function. Offering internet communication among working class parents and teachers is patently inadequate. All the demands for democracy now, open communication, respectful communication, giving voice, hearing other voices, and collectively solving problems – what I have called populism (Ratner, 2019d) -- fail to concretely apprehend and transform specific historical-materialist factors that cause social and psychological problems. This is exactly what Huang & Lin demonstrated. Their research scientifically refutes the populist approach to emancipation around the world today.

Instead, the research calls for Chinese working class parents to eradicate the class system that marginalizes working class families and also generates a self-deprecating, conformist cultural psychology in working class people that impedes their social involvement to solve problems. This is the emancipatory value of cultural-historical psychological science. Vygotsky proposed this emancipatory strategy (intervention) in his solution to personality degradation that takes the form of transforming capitalist industry.⁵

Even powerful achievements in education do not overcome class divides. Graduating college is a case in point. Hurst (2018) studied graduates of American liberal arts colleges (between 2012 and 2014), and she found that class background differentiated the post-graduation outcomes of these students who had all experienced superior educational conditions. These educational conditions did not equalize the actual experience of students – just as equal access to social networking did not equalize the participation of Chinese parents. The reason is that individuals enter the “same” conditions bearing unequal habituses as well as material artifacts which have been organized by unequal class backgrounds.

These mental and material resources lead to different experiences and outcomes with the “same” educational conditions. This is what occurred with working class and middle class Chinese parents utilizing “the same” internet social networking technology. In both these cases, subjects acted as agents/role players of their social class. Their cultural psychologies/habituses comprised a social condition or role that they brought into the educational social condition – Bourdieu and Foucault emphasized this in their notions of habitus and governmentality. The result was an interaction of social conditions, with social class modulating education. It was not the result of individuals negotiating their personal agencies with the educational institution (Ratner, 2017c).

If college education does not overcome social class differences in resources, experiences, and outcomes, the only way to eliminate these structural inequities is to go beyond the educational system and transform the class system. Educational improvement requires eradicating social class that structures education and also structures the mentality of subjects to deal with it.

Vygotsky stated this historical-materialist, emancipatory program as follows, "Questions of education will be fully solved only when questions of social order have been fully solved. Every attempt at constructing educational ideals in a society with social contradictions is a utopian dream. The social environment is the only educational factor that can establish new reactions in the child, and so long as it harbors unresolved contradictions [e.g., contradictions among social classes], these contradictions will create cracks in the most well thought-out and most inspired educational system" (1997b, p. 236).

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Notes

- 1 This means that general demands for **fairness** are inadequate social ideals because the general demand will be filled by the concrete form of fairness (equity) in capitalist societies, which entails maximizing profit -- by garnering the best/highest price at the expense of equality and also individual and community well-being.
- 2 Leontiev explained the methodology for tracing cultural-psychological relationships as follows: "Our general method consists in finding the structure of men's activity that is engendered by given concrete, historical conditions, and starting from that structure to bring out the essential psychological features of the structure of their consciousness" (Leontiev, 2009, p. 207, my emphasis). Vygotsky explained that apprehending this connection requires using "indirect methods," which the historian and the geologist utilize to apprehend the unseen past. This entails "the study of traces, influences, the method of interpretation and reconstruction, the method of critique, and the finding of meaning" of subjective activity in relation to social systems.
- 3 Psychological ontogenies join other areas of social critique, including education, housing, health care, economic exploitation and poverty. All of these critiques join in the comprehensive transformation of capitalism that is their common foundation. This which will emancipate people from all of these problems.
- 4 The same is true for cancer. Cancer is caused by a polluted ecology that is produced by capitalist industry. Understanding and eradicating cancer requires a historical-materialist understanding of capitalism and a congruent transformation of capitalism. Physicians cannot cure and prevent cancer with purely medical procedures, for medicine cannot comprehend or transform capitalism. Physicians must use their medical research to become social critics and activists who join the historical materialist transformation of capitalism.
- 5 Huang & Lin do not follow the logic of their theory and their findings; they do not call for historical-materialist transformation of social classes, class-based habituses, and capitalist governmentality in the behavior and consciousness of parents. Instead, they meekly conclude: "We call for corrective policies and guidelines on the usage of WeChat and other social network technologies in home-school dynamics" (Huang & Lin, 2019, p. 489). This recommendation remains within the confines of the original technological intervention to facilitate communication and to "become more aware" of social differences in that process. It is important to problematize this reformist conclusion. Why do these Chinese social scientists emphasize the interpersonal reform of education which their own research has debunked? And why was the original intervention conceived on this level, when it contradicts the scientific and emancipatory principles of Marxist historical-materialism, which is claimed to be the guiding philosophy of China? And why did none of the teachers or school officials criticize and ameliorate the class-based responses to the interventions? Answers require a Marxist critique of Chinese social science and social policy. Historical-materialist critique will regard the absence of genuine Marxist thought in this case as a reflection of its absence from Chinese society, and specifically from the political-economic core of society, which is more capitalist than socialist.