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Cultural-Historical Perspective in Spain and Portugal: Developing Theoretical and Methodological Approaches

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Abstract

Cultural-historical research has had a relevant presence in Spain and, to a lesser extent, in Portugal, since the 1970s. A review of the state of the art of the cultural-historical approach in these two countries allows us to identify four general lines of research: 1) sociocultural activities, mental actions, and semiotic mediation; 2) education in schools; 3) education beyond schools, including educational practices in community-cultural contexts; and 4) identity construction in (other) sociocultural settings. This perspective has been developed by an active community of researchers in the fields of psychology, education, and other social sciences.

Keywords: cultural-historical theory; theoretical and methodological approaches; Spain and Portugal; Seville human activity approach; educational research

Introduction

Rosa, Montero, and Ramirez (see this issue) provide an autobiographical look at their experience in the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition (LCHC) and at the origins and consolidation of cultural-historical (C-H) theory in Spain. They also describe the academic-institutional context in which the C-H approach appeared. In this paper, we describe our personal view of the state of the art of C-H theory in Spain and Portugal. Although our perspective is not primarily autobiographical, it is unavoidable to tell the story from the point of view of the authors. We—including Luísa Aires, who is Portuguese and works in a Portuguese educational institution—share a specific approach to C-H theory that can be referred to as the *Seville human activity approach*. It was initiated by Professor Juan Daniel Ramirez and was heavily influenced by the LCHC approach to C-H theory, as well as by James V. Wertsch.

Our story begins in 2005 with the celebration of the First Congress of the International Society for Cultural and Activity Research (ISCAR), in Seville. This congress was the first after the unification of the two former scientific societies that grouped C-H researchers: the International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory (ISCRAT) and the Society for Socio-Cultural Research (SSCR). We assume that this congress was not only important for the Seville groups working at the University of Seville and the Pablo de Olavide University, but also for the whole cultural-historical community in Spain and Portugal. A few years later, the idea of celebrating periodical meetings was enthusiastically assumed by C-H researchers in both countries. Since then, three Iberian ISCAR meetings (ISCAR Ibérico) have been held in Madrid, Girona, and Seville, and the next meeting is to be held at the University of Alcalá de Henares, near Madrid, in 2020.

Cultural-Historical Theory in Spain and Portugal: A Preliminary Outline

Since their origins in the Soviet Union, C-H theory and research have been especially linked to education. Currently, the relationship between C-H theory—and cultural-historical approaches in general—and education is even stronger. This close relationship is also found in Spain and Portugal. However, within this general scheme, we find a wide variety of topics addressed in C-H research in our countries. To present a general story of C-H theory in Spain and Portugal, we first identify the main research lines since 2005: 1) sociocultural activities, mental actions, and semiotic mediation; 2) education in schools; 3) education beyond schools, including educational practices in community-cultural contexts; and 4) identity construction in (other) sociocultural settings. The presentation of the research lines includes a description of the specific topics addressed by C-H researchers as well as the fundamental theoretical concepts and methodological approaches from which these topics have been researched.

1) Sociocultural Activities, Mental Actions, and Semiotic Mediation

The studies within the first line of research—sociocultural activities, mental actions, and semiotic mediation—have addressed the relationship between formal education, considered to be a sociocultural activity (Leontiev, 1981), and mediated actions (Wertsch, 1985; Zinchenko, 1985). Among them, we include studies addressing categorization, memory, problem solving, and argumentation. They are heavily influenced by Luria's (1976) classical studies in Central Asia and, more recently, by Scribner and Cole's (1981) and Cole's (1990) comparative research. In this tradition, special attention has been paid to the relationship between literacy activities carried out in formal education settings and mental actions (Cubero, de la Mata, & Cubero, 2008).

In addition to these studies, others that have specifically addressed one of the classical problems in Vygotsky's and C-H theory—namely, the role of egocentric-private speech in self-regulation—should also be mentioned. In this article, we use the two terms egocentric-private. The term *egocentric speech* fits better with Vygotsky's tradition, as it recognizes the functional undifferentiation between speech for oneself and speech for others, whereas *private speech* was coined by Flavell and other authors who worked in a different theoretical tradition.

Notwithstanding this, the fact that the term private speech has been extensively used by C-H researchers in Spain and Portugal, together with the Piagetian resonances of the term egocentric speech, leads us to use both terms interchangeably. In general, these studies have been based on the conceptualization of egocentric-private speech as mediating mental actions in children and adults (Sánchez, Alarcón, & de la Mata, 2009; Winsler, Fernyhough, & Montero, 2009).

A specific characteristic of these lines of research lies in the use of experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies, based on the design of controlled situations and the application of statistical techniques for data analysis.

2) Education in Schools

A significant part of C-H-based research in Spain and Portugal has focused on improving learning and teaching in different educational settings and levels: from primary schools to university classes, in both face-to-face and online settings. While some of those studies were predominantly theoretically oriented, most of them focused on developing teaching and learning strategies and techniques.

Within this line of research, we find research projects focused on the analysis of teacher-student and student-student interactions that have identified interaction patterns, resources, and semiotic devices used by both teachers and students in classroom interactions (Cubero, 2011;

Cubero et al., 2008; Mauri, Clará, Colomina, & Onrubia, 2017). They have had a great impact on applied studies, especially with issues such as inclusive and collaborative methodologies, educational technology, gender, emotions in education, teacher education, distributed assessment, and online learning. Another topic that has been the object of increasing interest in the last 10 years is the study of teacher and learner identity (Coll & Falsafi, 2010; Prados, Cubero, Santamaría, & Arias, 2013). These studies, in addition to the concepts developed in the C-H approach and elaborated through Bakhtin's ideas, provide contributions from different theoretical frameworks, such as discursive psychology, discourse analysis, conversation analysis, and narrative approaches.

Focusing on the learner's activity and especially on communication and social interaction, C-H theory has encouraged new collaborative and inclusive learning methodologies, centered on students and their contexts (Coll, Engel, & Bustos, 2009; Courela & César, 2014). This perspective and other concepts from Bakhtin give rise to a set of studies regarding literacy and discursive genres in school (Ramírez, 1995).

The concept of cultural mediation (Cole, 1995) has been one of the most important contributions of the C-H approach in education, opening up new perspectives for communication and sociocultural technology (de Pablos, 1996, 2009; del Río, 1996), gender studies in education (Cubero et al., 2015; Rebollo-Catalán, García-Pérez, Piedra, & Vega-Caro, 2011), and a pedagogy of emotions (Rebollo-Catalán & Hornillo-Gómez, 2010). At the same time, it has had some influence on research related to teaching identity and teacher education (Cubero, Santamaría, Prados-Gallardo, & Arias, 2016).

Within this line, there are also studies regarding online learning and digital media, as well as literacy and digital inclusion, that have led to innovative practices, not only in formal educational contexts, but also in out-of-school and informal contexts (Coll & Monereo, 2008).

3) Education Beyond Schools, Including Educational Practices in Community-Cultural Contexts

In our countries, the studies regarding education using a C-H approach have also examined education from a broader perspective, taking into consideration cultural and ethnic issues within schools as well as the relationships between families, communities, and schools as institutions. From this perspective, cultural identities, linguistic issues, and/or intercultural relations have been the focus of some C-H researchers. More specifically, we note the following topics: communicative competence in multilingual and multicultural school settings (Vila, Esteban-Guitart & Oller, 2010); identity construction in intercultural educational settings (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014; Esteban-Guitart, Nadal, & Vila, 2010; Lalueza, 2012); school-community relations in contexts of cultural diversity, with special attention to Roma community and migrant groups (Lalueza, 2012; Lalueza, Sánchez-Busqués, & Padrós, 2016; Macías Gómez-Estern, Martínez-Lozano, & Vásquez, 2014); and communities of practice through digital communication inside and outside schools (Lacasa, 1994, 2013).

These studies are based on a variety of concepts, including Bakhtin's concepts of voice, speech genres, and social languages; the notion of communities of practice and legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991); communities of learning (Rogoff, Bartlett, & Goodman Turkkanis, 2001); and funds of knowledge (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005), among others.

The Fifth Dimension after-school program developed by Michael Cole and The Distributed Literacy Consortium (2006) has influenced the Network of Research and Intervention on Literacy and Digital Inclusion (ObLID network) and its conception of digital citizenship. This network is characterized by an intensive activity and presence in meetings, seminars, and fora (Aires, 2014; Aires, Dias, Azevedo, Rebollo-Catalán, & García-Perez, 2014).

The studies in this line of research have adopted a predominantly qualitative approach, using methods such as ethnography, including self-ethnography and visual ethnography; action research; and, in general, methodologies based on social participation of researchers, individuals, and communities.

4) Identity Construction in (Other) Sociocultural Settings

Over the last decade there has been a growing interest in investigating self and identity construction beyond education. In general, studies in this area have adopted a narrative approach to the analysis of identity issues. These studies contain two sublines, for both theoretical and methodological reasons.

The first subline can be referred to as self-construction in cultural settings. It includes studies about autobiographical memory, self, and culture (de la Mata, Santamaría, & Ruiz, 2016; Santamaría, de la Mata, Cubero, & Hansen, 2017; Santamaría, de la Mata, Hansen, & Ruiz, 2010), and about self-(re)construction in individuals and groups at risk of social exclusion (de la Mata, Cubero, Santamaría, & Saavedra, 2015; Saavedra, Cubero, & Crawford, 2012; Sala & de la Mata, 2017). These studies show an integration of concepts from cultural psychology to cross-cultural research and eco-cultural approaches. The narrative approach by authors such as Jerome Bruner (2003) integrates notions such as independent versus interdependent self (Markus &

Kitayama, 2010) and cultural pathways to development (Greenfield, Keller, Fuligni, & Maynard, 2003).

The studies within the second subline are based on the conception of identity as mediated action (acts of identification; Rosa, Blanco, Huertas, Mateos, & Díaz, 1995). This conception emphasizes the rhetorical nature of the actions by which individuals and groups identify in sociocultural settings. In this approach, the moral dimension of the acts of psyche (Rosa, 2007) is also highlighted. In addition to the influence of C-H theory and especially of Jaan Valsiner's scholarship, we also see the influence of symbolic action theory and the dramaturgical conception of human conduct.

Regarding methodology, this line is characterized by a plurality of methodological approaches, both quantitative, including statistical data analysis, and qualitative, including a variety of methodologies and techniques.

In addition to the above-mentioned lines, C-H researchers in our countries have addressed many other topics, for example the emergence and early stages of symbolic communication in infancy (Rodríguez, Moreno-Núñez, Basilio, & Sosa, 2015). These studies have applied methodologies that are characteristic of research about infant development, based on observation and, in some cases, experiments.

Concluding Remarks

In the previous pages, we have presented a brief summary of the origins of C-H theory in Spain and Portugal. During these early stages, the contributions of Michael Cole and the LCHC were crucial, particularly in their influence on some outstanding Spanish and Portuguese researchers. Cole's and the LCHC's interpretation of Vygotsky, Luria, and activity theory (CHAT)—and their own work with notions such as the Fifth Dimension, activity systems,

mediation systems, and re-mediation—has had a deep influence on C-H approaches.

Furthermore, the contributions of authors such as James V. Wertsch and Jaan Valsiner have also been essential in shaping C-H theory in our countries.

To conclude the paper, we emphasize our perspective on three defining characteristics of C-H theory in Spain and Portugal.

As a first characteristic, we must point out that C-H researchers have addressed a wide variety of topics. Notwithstanding this diversity, we believe that they can be organized into two general themes: education and identity. From our perspective, these two themes can be considered the main axes that organize most C-H research in our countries. As the last Iberian ISCAR (Seville 2017) showed, education remains the predominant field of research. This predominance is not restricted to schools and formal education institutions in general. There are an increasing number of studies that explore educational processes beyond schools and the interrelations between educational institutions, communities, and culture in general. At the same time, the last decade has witnessed a growing interest in issues related to identity, both in education as well as in other cultural settings. Currently, there are several ongoing research projects exploring the issues of identity in different professions, in situations of social exclusion (mental health, migration, gender violence), or in theatre projects, in our context. Since this interest is shared across disciplines by C-H communities around the world, we anticipate a deepening interest in identity issues in our ISCAR community, as well.

The second characteristic of C-H theory and research in Spain and Portugal is its theoretical plurality. In addition to the classics, we must recognize the essential contributions of Michael Cole and the LCHC, James V. Wertsch, Jaan Valsiner, and Barbara Rogoff to the Spanish and Portuguese readings of the classics. At the same time, we observe, in the origins of

the Iberian C-H theory, a fruitful dialogue with the Piagetian tradition. Authors such as Cesar Coll, Jesús Palacios, Juan Daniel Ramírez, Mario Carretero, and Cintia Rodríguez, for instance, share a common Piagetian background with Vygotsky and C-H theory. Although this background is not evident in later generations of C-H researchers, we think it is part of our tradition.

Finally, the C-H research in our countries is characterized by a methodological plurality. Although there is a predominance of qualitative methodologies—including ethnography, discourse analysis, and narrative approaches—that coincides with the general landscape of C-H research across the world, C-H researchers also conduct quantitative research, including the use of statistical data analysis. In this sense, C-H theory has been enriched with contributions from diverse theoretical approaches in psychology, education, and social sciences, and their corresponding methodological approaches. We note, for instance, discursive psychology (Edwards & Potter, 1992), dialogical self theory (Hermans & Gieser, 2012), narrative approaches in sociolinguistics and communication (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2015), and, of course, cross-cultural psychology of the self (Markus & Kitayama, 2010).

The wide variety of topics with diverse theoretical contributions applied in their study, along with a plurality of methodological approaches, allows us to predict the promising development of C-H research in our countries in the coming years.

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