

Hello, class. So today we're going to be talking about sociocultural theory, which is the sort of large, all-encompassing theory which talks about the social development of children as well as their linguistic and cognitive development. It wraps it all together into one general theory. It's a little bit tricky to understand at times. So let's talk about it together.

First, sociocultural theory was founded by Lev Vygotsky, who was a Soviet psychologist around the early 1900s. He worked with some general obscurity at first. Not very many people knew about him, especially in the US and the West due to the Iron Curtain of the Soviet Union, which didn't let a lot of this information out.

But even at home he was criticized by a lot of his fellow Soviets. His ideas tended to be radical in their eyes, especially in psychology, and it wasn't until later that they were rediscovered in the US and the West. And now they're really influential, particularly in educational theories of learning.

So the sociocultural theory first said that a person's cognitive development was dependent on the culture and the tools and the languages that the people around them used. Essentially it said that you needed to view the person in context, that you couldn't separate them or try to understand their development without first looking at the world around them. So different cultures might have different kinds of goals or different things that they value that they're looking for people to learn over time. And this can be even true over history as well.

For example, in the US, when the US was first founded, a lot of people generally valued agricultural goals, becoming a farmer in some way. So any kind of skills that related to that tended to be more valued, and those were the kinds of things that children generally learned, especially in a school setting. Later on, in the later 1800s, early 1900s, the US tended to value more industrial goals because that was the sort of track that they were taking at that time. Factories were being built, and cities were being built, and so people tended to value those kinds of ideas a bit more.

Now the US is a bit more commercial, and the jobs that people take tend to be more conceptual. So we tend to value today a lot more creative thinking and individualism and critical thinking as well, which were things that were not as important or valuable if we go all the way back to the beginning of the US. So you can see that this kind of context might have an influence on the person and the things that they're going to learn and develop.

So Vygotsky's theories aligned with another important theory in psychology, which is called social learning theory. Social learning theory says that people learn not only in relation to their environments or their internal mental processes. In other words, they don't just learn behaviorally or cognitively, but also in relation to other people around them, people that are important to them or their external social environments.

So Vygotsky's basic idea, which aligns with this social learning theory, said that cognitive processes, those internal mental processes we have, they begin as social ones. In other words, we first learn how to do things externally with the help of others or through social interactions and then over time internalize them so that we learn them and we understand how to do them alone. So this idea is exemplified in what Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development. What this is is it's a range of tasks that a person is able to do, either alone or with the help of other people around them.

So the idea is that we start with tasks that we're able to do proximally or, in other words, with help or socially. And then over time, we move from being able to do it with help to being able to do it with a little bit of less help, and a little bit of less help, all the way over to being able to do it alone. And so this process of learning is being able to move through the zone from one end to [INAUDIBLE].

Now, because learning is a social process, the teacher or the person who's assisting with the learning that's occurring provides certain kinds of help. For example, a teacher first might model how to do something to show them on their own so the child can watch and see how it's done. Then the teacher might instruct. They might give some kind of verbal assistance to the child as they're trying to perform their actions.

Then the teacher might also scaffold the process. What scaffold means is that the teacher might adjust the task or provide certain kinds of assistance for a person that hasn't yet learned how to do a particular kind of task. So, for example, they might make it a bit easier or break it into parts so that a beginner, who hasn't quite learned how to do it, might have a little less difficulty learning. So that over time, without adjustment, the child is able to do it on their own.

It's also important to note the importance of language in Vygotsky's theories, which is to say that language is a social process in itself. But it's also tied to cognition. It's the sort of bridge that builds the Zone of Proximal Development. So we're able to communicate assistance, we're able to help people first by using language. But also a child begins to internalize that language and be able to use it themselves. And that's something that we might call self-talk.

Now, self-talk is when someone talks to themselves, either aloud or silently, and it shows their internal processes. So when you see a child who's trying to do something on their own, sometimes they will talk aloud. And this is a normal sort of thing according to Vygotsky because it means that they're taking those social processes and they're trying to internalize them to put them in with their own minds. This is a sort of intermediate step in the zone. It's talking to yourself as another social person.