

My Own Funds of Identity: A Brief Introduction

Cultural psychology, or the sociocultural perspective in psychology in general, and Vygotsky's approach in particular, was something I began to take seriously following my first trip to Chiapas, Mexico. It was 2006, the same year I had been at the Leeds Social Science Institute, England, to familiarize myself with the multimethod autobiographical approach pioneered by Anna Bagnoli, who is now at the University of Cambridge. Her approach, as discussed in Chapter 3, would prove highly useful in detecting what I would eventually call the *funds of identity* that all learners bring with them to their place of learning.

It was shortly after I had graduated in psychology (2004) and philosophy (2006) and pursuing a doctorate in educational psychology as part of the Interuniversity Doctoral Program, coordinated by César Coll, of the University of Barcelona in Spain.

Of my training in psychology, I remember the classes given by Ignasi Vila, with whom I subsequently worked, and still do, and with whom I did my thesis, along with Josep Maria Nadal, former rector of the University of Girona. I remember also the students' association we created "Associació per a la Recerca i la Promoció de la Psicologia / Association to Research and Promote Psychology" (ARPP) in 2000 that enabled us to discover and meet professors from other Spanish universities who would eventually become friends: among others, Pablo del Río, Amelia Álvarez, José Luis Linaza, Juan Daniel Ramírez, Alberto Rosa, or the late Dr. Miquel Siguán, who passed away in 2010 and who was one of the foremost promoters of Vygotsky, and of psychology in general, in this country, along with José Luis Pinillos, with whom I also became acquainted through the students' association.

However, I must confess that I have even better memories of my studies in philosophy, because it was my great fortune to be educated in what is probably one of the best philosophy departments in the country. Professors

Terricabras, del Pozo, Alcoberro, Pradas, Zimmer, Pineda, among others, familiarized us with the analytical philosophy of Wittgenstein, American pragmatism, and the European philosophical tradition. And it was from this point on that I managed to establish relationships between American pragmatism, European phenomenology, Wittgenstein, and Vygotsky.

But returning to the field of my training in psychology, it was Professor Ignasi Vila, a disciple of Dr. Siguán, who probably had the greatest impact on my training (along with Luis Moll, Carl Ratner, and César Coll). He was among the first – in Europe as a whole and in Spain in particular – to introduce two authors who have marked my intellectual progress since then: Lev Vygotsky and Urie Bronfenbrenner. These are the authors whose work underlies the notions of *funds of identity*, as we shall see in Chapter 2. Another important figure is Jerome Bruner, whom I have been fortunate enough to meet and converse with on different occasions, thanks to the generous friendship of José Luis Linaza. However, as I was saying, I began to look in earnest at the Vygotskian approach to cultural psychology in 2006.

Back then I was collecting data on the psychological effects of participation in a university environment that implemented an intercultural education model (the *Universidad Intercultural de Chiapas*) among young indigenous and mestizo students, many from San Cristóbal de las Casas and nearby (Esteban-Guitart & Rivas, 2008; Esteban-Guitart, Bastiani, & Vila, 2009). I had immersed myself in a subject that would stay with me from then on and that has become a recurrent theme in the social sciences: the psychosocial mechanisms involved in the construction of human identity (Esteban-Guitart, 2009). It is a problem discussed by Plato but that is especially developed in Cartesian dualism; in the disputes about subjectivity; and, more recently, in deliberations regarding the social, cultural, and human consequences of globalization. However, as I sought answers regarding the effects that an explicitly intercultural higher education model may have on the indigenous and mestizo people of Chiapas in terms of their empathy, tolerance for diversity, self-esteem, and ethnic identity, I began to find questions about *how* identity is constructed, *what* it consists of, and *why* this subject is relevant in contemporary settings. One of my former philosophy professors said that the best answer is often a good question. I think he was right.

What I had expected to find, in the classrooms of Chiapas, were attention deficit hyperactivity disorders, children with bad moods and tantrums at two years of age, or theory of mind development at around four years of age, according to the classic false belief tasks that I was applying (and that

I had learned about during my participation – another good memory – in a group led by Elisabet Serrat, also of the University of Girona, with whom I now share the direction of the psychology department, following the retirement of the former director, Ignasi Vila). However, what I actually found was a complex political, linguistic, and culturally diverse reality, in which the Zapatista autonomous schools confronted the government, and in which boys and girls as young as four or five collaborated in farm work and house work, as well as caring for younger siblings. I also noted the arbitrariness and scant ecological relevance of some of the basic concepts of my study: the idea of *mestizo* and *indigenous*, for example. In fact, many participants declared they had never self-identified as indigenous or mestizo until the appearance of questionnaires, like the ones I was using, or those used by the Intercultural University of Chiapas. Applying Heisenberg's uncertainty principle, we could say that the aims of my study and my intervention derived from, and had an effect on, the construction, positioning, or acts of identification of the participants. This was an important lesson – which will be developed throughout this book – on the social, cultural, and historically contingent, situated, and distributed nature of human identities or, in bronfenbrennerian terms, the ecological nature of human experience.

It could be said that I had experienced my first empirical evidence of the Vygotskian premise according to which, as Ratner would say (2006, p. 16): “We are the product of the products we produce.” We are literally the product of our participation in educational practices, whether formal or informal, through which we acquired and learned to use a huge range of resources and psychological and cultural tools thanks to which we can organize, regulate, and direct our own behavior and that of others. In fact, we literally construct ourselves as individuals with these resources and tools.

Influenced by the work of Michael Tomasello on “shared intentionality” (Lazarus & Esteban-Guitart, 2013), I suggested the term *intentional conditioning* to describe this capacity (Esteban-Guitart, 2013). The theory is widely known and is based on the premise that our behavior stops being biologically or environmentally conditioned when we intentionally (either explicitly or implicitly) incorporate auxiliary cultural media that, from “the outside” (culture) act upon “the inside” (the thoughts and behaviors of people). An alarm clock, for example, allows us to determine our behavior with regard to getting up in the morning *from the outside*, and in using such a device, we are no longer subject to conditioning by other forces, such as the need to rest or our biological “clock.” Similarly, Facebook and WhatsApp allow us to overcome physical barriers and communicate with anyone at

any time. In a deeper sense, devices and media such as these create particular cultural and psychological architectures, as I will argue later.

After fully immersing myself in the Vygotskian approach to cultural psychology, thanks mainly to the writings of Vygotsky himself and his colleague Luria, as well as those of renowned commentators such as Michael Cole, Jaan Valsiner, Barbara Rogoff, and James Wertsch, another turning point in the direction of my interests arrived in 2010.

This was when I began to work with Carl Ratner at the Institute for Cultural Research and Education in Trinidad, California, and with Luis Moll and all the people of the “family” that comprised the department of Teaching, Learning & Sociocultural Studies at the University of Arizona: Norma González; Iliana Reyes; Marta Civil; Cecilia Ríos; Jesús Acosta; José Soto; Aura González; Sandra Soto; Ana Iddings; Patricia Azuara; Janelle Johnson; Ellen Bounds; Lisa Schwartz; and Richard Ruiz, who sadly passed away recently. I remember very well the sense of humor and compromise for social justice of Richard Ruiz. Special human abilities characterize the members of this incredible and unique department. Many of them are now at other universities, scattered throughout the world, but all of them are remembered with much admiration, affection, and love. I will never forget nor be sufficiently grateful for the great fortune this year represents, and the impact it had on all levels of my life and training. It was here that I comprehended Ratner’s macro cultural psychology and the *funds of knowledge* program that had emerged in Arizona a few decades earlier. And it was from that moment on that I became more deeply interested in the educational applications of Vygotskian theory in general and, more specifically, in developing the topic I had been studying: a theory of identity that would be educationally useful and relevant (Acosta-Irqui & Esteban-Guitart, 2010; Esteban-Guitart, 2011a, 2013, 2014a; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a, 2014b; Esteban-Guitart & Ratner, 2010, 2011; Reyes & Esteban-Guitart, 2013).

Aristotle said that *Being* can be expressed, indeed it is expressed, in many ways (“Being is said in many ways”). And recently Bruner (2012) warns that, in its deepest sense, psychology seeks to understand and investigate the human condition but, given the multifaceted nature of this condition, it can be conceptualized in many different ways. As with any psychological construct, the same is true for the concept of identity. It is not my purpose here to list all the possible ways of capturing such a complex phenomenon as *identity*, but I do intend to describe and illustrate one of them. For now, however, my intention in this introduction is to provide an explanation of the influences and interests that underlie the fundamental

thesis of this book (which we have explored elsewhere: Esteban-Guitart, 2012a, 2012b, 2014b; Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a, 2014b; Esteban-Guitart & Vila, 2013a; Esteban-Guitart & Saubich, 2013; Esteban-Guitart, Subero, & Brito, 2015; González-Patiño & Esteban-Guitart, 2015; Jovés, Siqués, & Esteban-Guitart, 2015; Saubich & Esteban-Guitart, 2011; Subero, Vila, & Esteban-Guitart, 2015).

This thesis proposes using *funds of identity* as a complementary notion to *funds of knowledge* with the aim of using this concept for educational purposes to structure and link the learning experiences, practices, and lifestyles of learners both in and out of school. The strongest influence is the socio-cultural orientation behind the concept. The principal interest is to use this concept for educational purposes, that is, to optimize and coordinate the relationships – to establish continuities – between learners and the contexts of their lives: the school, the family, and the social environment. This is an aspect that, as will be seen, is based on the notion of the mesosystem that Bronfenbrenner defined in the 1970s.

But before we can fully grasp such a purpose and thesis, we need to situate the problem, or the notion, as well as illustrate its educational applications. With this in mind, this book is divided into five chapters.

In the first chapter, the aim is to justify and contextualize the contemporary debate regarding the crisis of traditional systems of formal education in what is defined as a liquid, global, or informational society. This is a subject that forms part of the current projects in which I am involved, Bridging Learning Experiences (<http://bridginglearning.psyed.edu.es/en/>), led by César Coll and Ignasi Vila. These projects have enabled me to arrive at a diagnosis of the current situation, the *Nueva Ecología del Aprendizaje* [The New Ecology of Learning], and with Javier González-Patiño, of the Autonomous University of Madrid, we have come to the conclusion that we have outgrown the TV-centric society and the PC-centric society and that we are now more probably a mobile-centric society characterized by the massive and widespread penetration of digital devices in the artifacts of everyday life, the most widely used of which is currently the smartphone (González-Patiño & Esteban-Guitart, 2014). Defining this notion, and situating learning and teaching within contemporary settings, is the focus of the first chapter. Once again: “We are the product of the products we produce.”

In the second chapter, I describe the origin, objectives, and the basis of the Funds of Knowledge project that emerged in Tucson, Arizona, in the 1980s. This will allow me to contextualize the core notion of this book, which is the concept of *funds of identity*.

In the third chapter, using an extended version of the multimethod autobiographical approach, I describe how to identify and detect the funds of identity of learners so that subsequently, in Chapter 4, we can present a number of educational experiences involving funds of identity carried out in Catalonia.

This region, on the border between Spain and France, is presently an autonomous community of Spain that, in recent decades, has been characterized by the impact of migration mainly from Africa, Latin America, Asia, and Europe. It is also characterized, like many other parts of the planet, by the harsh, profound, and persistent political and economic crisis of the early twenty-first century.

Finally, by way of conclusion, I attempt to justify the importance of the learners' identities in current educational scenarios. This will oblige us to return to the main thesis of which I have thus far given only an outline: the need to structure the learning paths and experiences that today's learners take on throughout the length and breadth and depth of their lives – life-long, life-wide, and life-deep learning (Banks et al., 2007). To do so, I shall return to the notion of funds of identity as an educational tool that can be used to facilitate the processes of articulation between different formal and informal learning contexts and, thereby, as a vehicle for promoting significant learning experiences.