

# Vygotsky, Agnes Heller e Ciampa: Aproximações teóricas sobre o processo de Identidade e Constituição Subjetiva.<sup>1</sup>

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## Resumo

Neste trabalho foi realizada uma contextualização teórica das concepções de diferentes autores a respeito do processo da construção social dos sujeitos. O objetivo é de contribuir para o entendimento teórico sobre a Identidade em uma perspectiva histórico-cultural. Embora os estudiosos tenham contribuições diferentes, percebe-se que há pontos em comum, principalmente ao considerarem a constituição identitária como um processo ativo e permeado pela história e por fatores sociais. Com este estudo é possível afirmar que as pessoas sempre mudam e este é um princípio de sua formação. Esta mudança metamórfica se dá em consonância com os movimentos históricos, culturais, sociais e políticos.

**Palavras-chave:** Identidade. Psicologia histórico-cultural. Subjetividade.

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## **Vygotsky, Agnes Heller and Ciampa: theoretical approaches to the process of identity and subjective constitution**

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### **Abstract**

This study provides a theoretical contextualization of the conceptions of different authors regarding the process of social construction of individuals. The objective is to contribute to the theoretical understanding of Identity from a historical-cultural perspective. Although scholars have different contributions, it is clear that there are points in common, especially when considering identity formation as an active process permeated by history and social factors. With this study, it is possible to affirm that people always change and this is a principle of their formation. This metamorphic change occurs in line with historical, cultural, social and political movements.

**Keywords:** Identity. Historical-cultural psychology. Subjectivity.

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### **Resumen**

En este trabajo, se llevó a cabo una contextualización teórica de las concepciones de diferentes autores sobre el proceso de construcción social de los individuos. El objetivo es contribuir al entendimiento teórico de la Identidad desde una perspectiva histórico-cultural. Aunque los estudiosos ofrecen distintas contribuciones, se perciben puntos en común, especialmente al considerar la formación identitaria como un proceso activo permeado por la historia y factores sociales. A través de este estudio, se puede afirmar que las personas experimentan cambios constantes, constituyendo un principio fundamental de su formación. Esta transformación metamórfica ocurre en consonancia con los movimientos históricos, culturales, sociales y políticos.

**Palabras clave:** Identidad. Psicología histórico-cultural. Subjectividad.

## Introdução

In the fields of Psychology and Education, various authors have sought to conceptualize identity, subjectivity, and personality. Psychology has developed and continues to create a variety of instruments to measure personality, such as tests, scales, and questionnaires. Different terms have been used to understand human characteristics. Idealist schools of thought have focused their studies on understanding identity as an internal process, dependent on the mind and more biological aspects. Meanwhile, materialist scholars, such as those in behavioral psychology, have emphasized the environment in which individuals are embedded as being responsible for shaping people. Interactionist perspectives consider the relationship between the individual and the environment to answer questions about what identity is. Among these authors, some have focused more on the environment, while others have emphasized the individual. We see that historical-cultural psychology has succeeded in defining identity as an active process, in which both the individual and the environment mutually modify each other, and the scope of this process is shaped by history and culture, including economic and social factors.

It is understood that identity and subjective constitution are processes shaped in accordance with the history and society in which the individual is embedded. Thus, the history of societies has much to reveal about the formation of identities. When considering the importance of social issues in understanding the formation of identity and subjectivity, authors such as Ciampa, Agnes Heller, and Vygotsky offer valuable contributions. Parallel and complementary considerations were made between these authors, as similarities and convergences were identified in their studies.

Ciampa (1996) conducted a significant study on identity, defining it as a metamorphic process that transforms through the activity of individuals and concrete historical moments. The Brazilian author drew on Marxist studies and historical-cultural psychology to poetically write: "The story of Severino and the history of Severina."

Although she did not directly focus on identity, another equally important author who contributed to this understanding is Agnes Heller, in her text *Sociology of Everyday Life* (1977). Heller (1977), while considering the concreteness of the social and cultural environment in identity formation, does not lose sight of the subjective nature of this process. According to Patto (1993), this was one of the critiques Heller directed at Marxist theory, especially Soviet Marxism.

According to Patto (1993), Heller disagreed with the theoretical contradiction in Marxism, which at times considered revolution as driven by the economic laws governing capitalist society,

and at other times viewed it as led by a revolutionary subject, who, through their class, would liberate all of humanity. This creates an internal contradiction in Marxist theoretical categories, which either focus on objective economic laws or ignore them and center on the revolutionary subject. In other words, Heller criticizes the dichotomy between subject and society in this theoretical model of Marxism.

We also present Vygotsky's considerations regarding human constitution, which, according to him, primarily occurs through the development of higher psychological functions. Vygotsky (2000/1929) explains the inter- and intrapsychic processes and considers them fundamental in constructing the internal understanding of the external world, that is, the way in which individuals develop their thinking, language, emotions, and ways of acting in the world. For Vygotsky (2000/1929): "I am the social relation of myself to myself" (VYGOTSKY, 2000/1929, p. 34).

In this way, Vygotsky highlights the social nature of human constitution, without which it does not occur. Although Vygotsky (2000/1929) emphasizes social relations in the construction of individuals, he neither denies nor diminishes the role of the individuals themselves in this process. On the contrary, it is through the mediated activity of these individuals that they can constitute themselves, transform, construct the world, and modify it.

Resuming the theoretical considerations proposed to understand the identity formation of individuals, we highlight Ciampa (1996), who relates history and identity. The author engages in a discussion with Habermas regarding the four stages of identity related to different historical moments. Ciampa (1996) proposes understanding identity through the interaction and relationship of the individual with their historical group. He presents the concept of identity with a reconciliatory view between the subjective and objective, as identity can only be constituted in the connection formed between the individual, society, culture, and history: "Identity is History. This allows us to affirm that there are no characters outside of a history, just as there is no history (at least human history) without characters." (CIAMPA, 1996, p. 156).

For Ciampa (1996), it is impossible to view an individual apart from their life history, the concrete means that allow them to live, the historical moment their society is experiencing, the culture in which they are embedded, and the economic conditions that permeate their work relationships: "[...] it is legitimate to say that identities, in their entirety, reflect the social structure while also reacting to it, preserving (or transforming) it." (CIAMPA, 1996, p. 171).

Within this historical and concrete perspective of understanding identities is also the analysis conducted by Agnes Heller. Heller (1977) illustrates the primitive relationship between the individual

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and society, using totems as an example, which consisted of small family groups where relationships were immediate. In this system, the individual and the environment, the particular and the universal, coincided. Collective representations were present, organizing social life. The particularities of individuals were considered based on their physical characteristics or attributes, without taking subjective differentiations into account, as the individual merged with the external world. According to Heller (1977), in totemic communities, there were few possibilities for choice and differentiation in relationships. Thus, there was no room for a differentiated personality. With the emergence of class societies, primarily through the social division of labor, a split occurred between the particular and the universal or general. From that moment on, the individual, in their particularity, could no longer appropriate the totality of social relations.

According to Heller (1977), only a few individuals have the possibility of appropriating the totality of social relations, as well as human generalizations, economic relations, and culture. These are the owners of the means of production. Heller (1977) asserts that, with the social division of labor, most men and women only appropriate part of these generalizations, human productions, and culture, resulting in alienation. For the author, the appropriation of objectifications, which are human productions embedded in culture, is a way of human survival and also a means of combating alienation.

It is within this line of thought from Heller that Ciampa (1996) views identity as something typically human. Thus, identity can be understood as the elevation of humanity, where individuals transition from the animalistic state to humanization. Ciampa (1996) states that identity occurs in the concreteness of life, history, and social, economic, and cultural conditions. According to this author, when studying identity, it is necessary to consider the history of the human species—that is, how it rises from the animal world to attain humanity.

Identity, according to Ciampa (1996), is rooted in the interest in humanization or the desire to become human. This interest is characterized by the need for the species' self-preservation, which defines the social evolution of history. However, Ciampa (1996) warns about the dialectical nature of this process, which does not happen without the fundamental participation of the individual. Therefore, history and culture will not simply define the identity of individuals, as materialists and immediatists might believe; rather, identity is actively constituted by individuals and shaped by external factors.

Considering that identity is formed in the relationship between the individual and society,

between the individual and the group, between the internal world and the external world, it becomes evident that, in some way, what exists outside individuals is inscribed within them, while they also transform what is external to them. Vygotsky (2000/1929) offers significant contributions to this process.

Vygotsky (2000/1929) asserts that higher psychological processes, which form part of identity, are constituted through the synthesis formed by the relationship between the biological organism and the external environment. In this way, Vygotsky (2000/1929) demonstrates that human body organs acquire a different function for humans compared to animals, as humans act instrumentally in the environment, transforming both the environment and themselves. Through this process of changing oneself and the external world, the individual builds their consciousness.

A fundamental issue in Vygotsky's (2000/1929) work on the constitution of the individual is the role of the group and others. Vygotsky (2000/1929) explains that it is through socialization that the human species becomes truly human: "Through others, we become ourselves" (VYGOTSKY, 2000/1929, p. 24). Thus, for this author, human development occurs in a social process that does not exclude the individual, but rather integrates them into the environment, where both are equally important and active in the construction of identities and society itself.

Personality becomes for itself what it is in itself through what it first manifests as its own "in itself" to others. This is the process of personality formation. From this, it becomes clear why everything that is internal in higher functions was necessarily external: that is, it was for others what it now is for itself. This is the core of the entire issue of the internal and the external. (VYGOTSKY, 2000/1929, p.24)

In this way, for Vygotsky, it is through social relations that what exists in the social realm becomes part of the psychological internal world of individuals. In his words: "Any higher psychological function was external—this means that it was social; before becoming a function, it was a social relation between two people" (VYGOTSKY, 2000/1929, p. 24).

Vygotsky's explanation surpasses idealistic and mechanistic conceptions of the process of human constitution, as for this author, personality does not arise solely from biological or subjective elements, nor is it merely a copy of the external environment. Vygotsky offers an explanation that encompasses both the interpsychic aspect, meaning the relationship between people, and the intrapsychic, where individuals internalize social relations to form themselves. Thus, when questioning "What is man?", one agrees with Vygotsky's response: "For us, it is the social personality = the set of social relations embodied in the individual (higher psychological functions, constructed by the social structure)" (VYGOTSKY, 2000/1929).

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Considering the issues raised by the theorists studied in the paragraphs above, another question may arise: How does the human species appropriate social relations and cultural productions to become a subject and construct identity? This question will be further explored in the next subsection of this work.

## **Identity and the Constitution of the Subject: An Active Process of Cultural Appropriation**

Up to this point, it is clear how the constitution of individuals is dependent on history and society. The term "dependence" is used rather than "determinism" because the latter would imply a restriction of the subject's constitution to social factors, leading to a "sociologistic" analysis that erases subjective contributions to the understanding of identity, which is not the aim of this text.

Heller (1977) asserts that it is necessary to understand the constitution of the human being in their particularity. The author points out that: "[...] each person can be an individuality, that there can also be individual personalities in life, and that daily life can also be configured individually (HELLER, 1977, p.7).

In this proposition, Heller (1977) emphasizes that individuals are constituted in their particularities, meaning they are not mere reflections of their environment but, through their activity, give themselves unique characteristics. It is important to remember that the process of subject formation is not solitary or individual, but rather permeated by culture and society. In other words, it does not solely depend on the biological and psychic structure of individuals, but also involves social relations and the cultural legacy produced by humanity.

Jacques (2001) asserts that identity is formed through the rupture between humans and the animal world, which occurs with the individual's insertion into the world and their appropriation of it. The author further emphasizes that this insertion does not happen in an adaptive or introjective manner, but through active and transformative appropriation in a socio-historical context. From this perspective, Jacques (2001) discusses an identity that is neither determined nor deterministic, neither personal nor social. For the author, it is essential to overcome these dichotomies when the goal is to understand identity.

Thus, it can be considered that the constitution of identity takes place in the relationship between the individual and culture. In this process, the individual is active, and their activity is symbolically mediated by social and cultural products. These assumptions about the constitution of



the individual and identity are grounded in Vygotsky's historical-cultural theory, which is, in turn, based on Marxist historical-dialectical materialism. It is important to note that Vygotsky's theory does not explicitly address the issue of identity formation itself; however, as Molon (2005) suggests, through the concepts Vygotsky introduces about the constitution of the individual, it is possible to reflect on identity.

Molon (2005) highlights that in Vygotsky's work, we can speak of various subjects, as the understanding of their constitution largely stems from how critics and followers interpret his ideas. Molon (2005) points out that some authors conceive the individual in Vygotsky with a focus on the individual, while others emphasize social factors. However, these conceptions overlook the Vygotskian subject, as they fail to consider the relational, dynamic, dialectical, active, and processual nature of human constitution.

To understand the individual and the constitution of their typically human functions, Vygotsky made a radical break from the explanations of his time. He rejected the mechanistic perspective, which spoke of a "copy-subject", that is, the understanding of the human being as shaped by the environment through a system of stimuli and responses. This conception is notably privileged in the behaviorist-analytical approach to psychology.

Vygotsky also rejected the idealistic conception of the individual, which placed the responsibility for existence on the individual, disconnected from history and culture. This view of the subject is widely developed in strands of Psychoanalysis, Cognitive Psychology, and Gestalt Psychology.

Vygotsky's proposal is to understand the concrete individual, life, and movement. He speaks of an active individual who, through their activity, transforms both nature and themselves. It is important to note that this activity is mediated by culturally produced tools and symbols. In this perspective, Vygotsky (1984) stated that:

The dialectical approach, acknowledging the influence of nature on humans, asserts that humans, in turn, act upon nature and, through the changes they provoke in it, create new natural conditions for their own existence. [...] All stimulus-response type methods share the inadequacy that Engels attributed to the naturalistic approach to history. In both, the relationship between behavior and nature is unidirectionally reactive. However, my collaborators and I believe that human behavior has that "transformative reaction on nature" which Engels attributed to tools. (VYGOTSKY, 1984, p. 70)

This transformation Vygotsky refers to occurs through activity, which consists of the subject's concrete and mediated action upon their environment. To understand how the subject is active, it is

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also necessary to consider another author: Leontiev, who, alongside Vygotsky, contributed to the development of a new method and theory to understand human constitution and the teaching and learning process in education.

Leontiev (1978) demonstrates that human development is governed by two laws: one natural and biological, and the other socio-historical. Leontiev (1978) does not deny the existence and importance of a biological apparatus that underpins human existence but asserts that this is not the sole factor in human constitution. According to Leontiev (1978), earlier beliefs about humans suggested that biologically inherited characteristics were determinant in the constitution of individuals. However, Leontiev (1978) argues that it is through work and within the context of labor that the human subject both produces themselves and transcends hereditary pre-determinations:

Through their activity, humans do more than just adapt to nature. They modify it according to the development of their needs. They create objects that meet their needs and also the means of producing these objects, from tools to the most complex machines. They build homes, produce clothing, and other material goods. The advances made in the production of material goods are accompanied by the development of human culture; their knowledge of the surrounding world and of themselves is enriched, and science and art are developed. [...] At the same time, in the course of human activity, their skills, knowledge, and know-how are in a sense crystallized in their products (material, intellectual, or ideal). (LEONTIEV, 1978, p.283).

In this passage by Leontiev, we can see how human life is created and developed through the movement of activity, which in turn is permeated by culture. The human practices that produce culture are also produced by it. This is the dialectical movement of life: the appropriation of culture generates human life, and human activity produces culture.

Agnes Heller (1977) emphasizes the importance of culture in the struggle against alienation and in the constitution of individuals. Heller (1977) explains culture as objectifications produced by human beings. She classifies these objectifications into those of everyday life and those of non-everyday life.

The objectifications of everyday life are simpler and more easily accessible to individuals, such as language, customs, and tools (utensils). On the other hand, the objectifications of non-everyday life are more complex and institutionalized productions, such as science, morality, ethics, politics, arts, and philosophy. For Heller (1977), human beings must appropriate these objectifications in order to survive.

In this line of thought, Agnes Heller (1977) argues that a subjective revolt against alienation is

possible, and this revolution can take place in private life. For Heller, the reaction to alienation can only happen through the appropriation of the values of generic objectifications, meaning that these objectifications (culture) serve as mediators for the revolution against alienation. Heller (1977) asserts that this subjective revolt against alienation arises from necessity, or in other words, through the interest of reason, as also highlighted by Ciampa (1996).

An example of this "turnaround" of the subject, who confronts alienation and transforms their life and identity, can be found in the real-life character discussed by Ciampa (1996) in his text *A estória do Severino e a história da Severina* (The Story of Severino and the History of Severina). Ciampa (1996) narrates and analyzes the story of Severina, a woman who, in her private life, manages to overcome alienation and her lack of self-awareness through what Agnes Heller (1977) would call generic objectifications. In Severina's case, this objectification was Eastern religion, but it could have been art, politics, or science. Severina broke free from her history of alienated repetitions, thus achieving an awareness of her life and the relationships she established with herself, with culture, and with others. The concepts of mediation, activity, and identity intertwine in the works of Ciampa, Agnes Heller, and Vygotsky. These are crucial approaches for understanding the constitution of individuals and their identities.

## **Final considerations**

The intention of this essay was not to exhaust the topic of identity, but rather to show that, from the perspective of Historical-Cultural Psychology one that takes social and cultural issues into account there are theorists who can and do engage in dialogue through their shared points of convergence. Thus, the commonalities between important figures such as Vygotsky, Agnes Heller, and Ciampa have been highlighted. It becomes evident that these authors share the ability to study identity by considering the subject's active relationship with their environment, which is permeated and mediated by historical, cultural, and social processes. These scholars can contribute to understanding the educational processes involved in the constitution of the individual, as well as the relationships in teaching and academic learning.

In the discussions raised in this work, we can reaffirm, with the help of Ciampa (1996), that identity is history, it is movement, metamorphosis, human production. Identity is not static; one is not the same person from the beginning to the end of life, nor are individuals within groups unchanged, as they evolve alongside culture, history, and the particularities of their daily lives. Thus, it can be

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said that as history changes, so do society, culture, and individuals. This process is both a product and a producer of individuals.

Vygotsky and Heller emphasize the active role of the individual, who is constituted not in isolation but through interaction with their environment, with others, and in their daily life. This study can contribute to the fields of Education, Psychology, Sociology, and related areas, enhancing the understanding of the educational process that shapes the individual not limited solely to academic learning of school content, but integrating the formation of personal identity.

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