In Memory

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Sylvia Scribner 1924–1991

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Sylvia Scribner came to the study of human development relatively late in her career. After graduating from Smith College in 1944, with a degree in economics, she spent more than 20 years working within the American labor movement, as research director of the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America, and other union organizations.

In the 1960s Sylvia returned to academic life. While studying for her PhD, she worked in community medicine at Albert Einstein College of Medicine. During this period, she became interested in questions of culture, literacy, and development, interests that led her to a postdoctoral fellowship in my laboratory at the Rockefeller University, after she obtained her PhD from the New School for Social Research in 1970.

When Sylvia first contacted me, my colleagues and I had just completed a monograph on cultural variations in cognitive development among the Kpelle of Liberia, a slash-and-burn agricultural group whose territory had begun to undergo internationally financed economic development, resulting in the introduction of schools and a cash economy, not long before our research began.

When she arrived at Rockefeller University some time later, our attention was focused less on work in Africa than on attempting to apply the methodological lessons of that research to various ethnic and social class groups in New York City. Having found significant variations in the way that both literate and nonliterate Kpelle performed various memory and logical reasoning tasks, depending upon variations in

experimental procedures and observational contexts, we sought to conduct follow-up studies to determine if similar variations could be produced locally by analogous means. Although the learning theory paradigm within which we were conducting this work was alien to Sylvia's background, she joined in with great good will and a critical mind. Fortunately, research money was relatively plentiful, so that it was possible to arrange for Sylvia to spend time in Liberia doing research that linked the studies we were conducting in New York to conditions that she encountered in the field.

During her stay in Liberia, Sylvia made preliminary inquiries into a unique research opportunity that we had discussed in a casual way for some time. Might it be possible to carry out a

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study of the influence of literacy on individual and social development among the Vai people of Liberia, one of the better documented cases of a society that had created its own writing system?

Upon her return, we sought and obtained foundation support for the study of literacy among the Vai, a project for which Sylvia took leading responsibility.

Sylvia's interest in literacy was by no means the result of her work in our laboratory. In a paper written in 1968, Sylvia had brought together evidence from historical and cross-cultural studies of literacy and schooling with the ideas of Vygotsky, whose work she had become familiar with through the 1962 publication of *Thought and Language*. Although it may be difficult to believe

in view of Vygotsky's popularity in recent years, his ideas were not at all prominent at the time, and Sylvia took the lead in getting others to treat his ideas as of contemporary significance. She was also a central figure in achieving the publication of a set of essays by Vygotsky, *Mind in Society*.

It is perfectly understandable, therefore, that the large-scale study of the consequences of literacy among the Vai was designed to have the scope necessary to test several of Vygotsky's ideas about the relationship between literacy and cognitive development. By the same token, it follows that the project was planned in a manner that permitted the integration of historical, sociological, anthropological, and psychological theories and methods into a single methodology centered on the study of cultural practices.

The *Psychology of Literacy*, the monograph growing out of the Vai research, was not completed at the time that I left Rockefeller University. During the next 2 years, while she was directing research at the National Institute of Education, Sylvia and I finished the monograph and Sylvia began formulating the research agenda that would occupy her for the rest of her life – the psychological nature of work and its role in human development. At the same time, she wrote several outstanding empirical and theoretical papers on issues growing out of our joint research. Three papers written between 1975 and 1985 stand out in my mind. The first reported her research on the recall of classical syllogisms, in which she combined insights from her training with Mary Henle at the New School for Social Research with ideas put forward by Alexander Luria

concerning the dichotomy between theoretical and empirical modes of thought, as well as ideas that had grown out of our efforts at cross-cultural research on reasoning. The second paper addressed the vexed problem of the role of experimentation in research on cognitive processes, particularly, but not exclusively, research carried out in alien cultures. Her attempts to 'situate the experiment' in cross-cultural research anticipated in a very direct manner contemporary discussions of situated cognition, as well as her own research on cognition and work. The third paper was on Vygotsky's uses of history, in which she went back to materials we had drawn on in creating the collection of essays in *Mind and Society* and brought forth an interpretation of Vygotsky's ideas that has still to be fully appreciated by English-speaking interpreters of Vygotsky.

In the late 1970s, when the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition moved to the University of California at San Diego, Sylvia went to the National Institute of Education, where she served as associate director. It was at this time that she began to put together the program of research on cognition and work that occupied her until her death.

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In the roughly 10 years that she was able to devote to research on work, Sylvia was able to complete two phases of an overall project, the full magnitude of which I can only guess at. In the earliest published studies, she addressed both the methodological and theoretical problems surrounding the study of problem solving in context, in particular the contexts constituted by different classes of workers and the tasks they were assigned to carry out.

In the course of this research, Sylvia and her colleagues were able to criticize the distinction between manual and intellectual labor (on some occasions discussed as practical and theoretical intelligence) by demonstrating that people who work with their hands also work with their heads to minimize the burden of their chores. A number of ingenious experiments took advantage of the social organization of mundane work (of milkmen, bartenders, waitresses, machine-tool workers) to demonstrate

the possibility of technically sophisticated cognitive-psychological analysis in context.

At the time of her death, Sylvia and her colleagues were involved in the study of work activity as it was being transformed by new, high technology apparatuses. Characteristically, this empirical work never stood apart from the larger theoretical and practical goals that Sylvia pursued throughout her life – a deeper understanding of ordinary working people as self-conscious beings capable of theoretical activity in the service of humanly constructed goals.

In her last publications and talks, Sylvia put forth her unique version of a socio-cultural approach to the study of human mind. She attempts to bring together the ideas of the founders of the Russian cultural-historical school (Leontiev, Luria, and Vygotsky) with the ideas of some of their students (most notably V.V. Davydov) and her own deep experience in the study and practice of work activity.

Unfortunately, Sylvia died before the bulk of this work could be brought to publication. She did, however, present the core of her ideas at the first and second International Congresses on Activity Theory in Berlin and Lahti, and a number of very stimulating reports have been completed by her students and colleagues, who are continuing the research tradition that she brought into being.

I feel enormously privileged to have been able to work with Sylvia Scribner for so many years. She has long stood for me as a model of the deeply committed, historically grounded, theoretically sophisticated social scientist of the kind that I aspire to become. She has left behind a legacy of rich ideas, well trained students, grateful colleagues, and research well begun. I expect to go on learning from her for the rest of my life. No greater gift could one hope for from a friend and colleague.

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