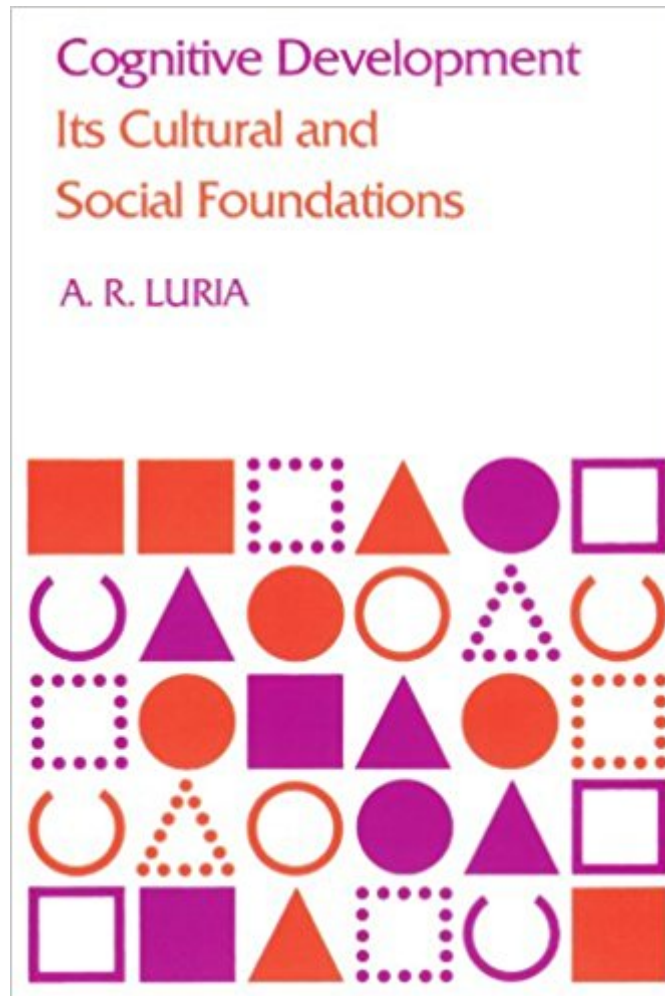




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Cognitive Development: Its Cultural And Social Foundations



Synopsis

Alexander Romanovich Luria, one of the most influential psychologists of the twentieth century, is best known for his pioneering work on the development of language and thought, mental retardation, and the cortical organization of higher mental processes. Virtually unnoticed has been his major contribution to the understanding of cultural differences in thinking. In the early 1930s young Luria set out with a group of Russian psychologists for the steppes of central Asia. Their mission: to study the impact of the socialist revolution on an ancient Islamic cotton-growing culture and, no less, to establish guidelines for a viable Marxist psychology. Lev Vygotsky, Luria's great teacher and friend, was convinced that variations in the mental development of children must be understood as a process including historically determined cultural factors. Guided by this conviction, Luria and his colleagues studied perception, abstraction, reasoning, and imagination among several remote groups of Uzbeks and Kirghiz — from cloistered illiterate women to slightly educated new friends of the central government. The original hypothesis was abundantly supported by the data: the very structure of the human cognitive process differs according to the ways in which social groups live out their various realities. People whose lives are dominated by concrete, practical activities have a different method of thinking from people whose lives require abstract, verbal, and theoretical approaches to reality. For Luria the legitimacy of treating human consciousness as a product of social history legitimized the Marxian dialectic of social development. For psychology in general, the research in Uzbekistan, its rich collection of data and the penetrating observations Luria drew from it, have cast new light on the workings of cognitive activity. The parallels between individual and social development are still being explored by researchers today. Beyond its historical and theoretical significance, this book represents a revolution in method. Much as Piaget introduced the clinical method into the study of children's mental activities, Luria pioneered his own version of the clinical technique for use in cross-cultural work. Had this text been available, the recent history of cognitive psychology and of anthropological study might well have been very different. As it is, we are only now catching up with Luria's procedures.

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Customer Reviews

In the early 1930s, Alexander Romanovich Luria set out with a group of fellow Russian psychologists for the steppes of central Asia. Their mission: to study the impact of the socialist revolution on an ancient Islamic cotton-growing culture and to establish guidelines for a viable Marxist psychology. The data collected among several remote groups of Uzbeks and Kirghiz supported the original hypothesis: the very structure of human cognitive processes differs according to the way in which social groups live out their various realities. For Luria, the legitimacy of treating human consciousness as a product of social history legitimized the Marxist dialectic of social development. The penetrating observations Luria drew from it, have cast new light on the workings of cognitive activity.

A. R. Luria was Professor of Psychology at Lomonosov Moscow State University. Michael Cole is Professor of Communication and Psychology and Director of the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition at the University of California, San Diego.

Luria conducted some of the most insightful research ever done about the how the ways we use language influences our thinking. This is a great book.

Bruce Lerro Author: Forging Promethean Psychology: From the Middle Ages To The End of the 19th century
Socio-historical psychology: putting the macro-social world into psychology
This is an extraordinary book not only for its time, but for right now. The Russian socio-historical school (including Luria) claim that changes in socio-historical institutions (such as the emergence of science, capitalism, absolutist states and media (printing press, newspapers, coined money) demand changes in occupational skills by individuals in order to do their job. These changes in job requirements then became internalized as psychological transformations first at work and then

at home and in leisure activities. As these institutional processes change over history, so do the psychological processes. For example, the 17th century was a vital time in developing a scientific methodology for experiments. It was also a time when merchants needed to increase the speed with which goods were consumed and produced. In the case of capitalism, this resulted in the increasing use of coined money, paper money and promissory notes and bills of exchange. In learning to use these symbolic tokens, people had to reason differently. It can be argued that Piaget's formal operation thinking either didn't exist before the 17th century or it was only developed in a weak form. At a micro-level, Vygotsky has been called the father of cooperative learning. Vygotsky and his colleagues believed that all higher psychological processes begin and end as social processes. They originate first in structured, meaningful, cooperative and recursive local interpersonal relations between people. Only later do these skills become internalized, private and independent functions, which individuals can carry out alone. Finally these skills are reapplied to the social world to larger contexts at a higher order of complexity. Vygotsky's work concentrated on how children learn over a very short period of time. However, it tells us little about how adults learn over the course of generations. But how about when a new economic system (capitalism) or technology (the printing press) revolutionized society as a whole? What happens to adults and their children when new systems emerge which require new occupations as well as upgrades of existing ones over many generations? Can this be traced? This is where Luria comes in. In the former Soviet Union, Vygotsky, Luria and Leontiev set out to develop a new socialist psychology, separating itself from the rationalist and empiricist traditions in the West. These rationalist and empiricist traditions treated the psychology of the individual as separated from the social and historical context in which he was produced. In the late 1920s Luria set out to demonstrate how the most basic psychological processes such as perception, the concept of self, how objects are categorized, and how people reasoned were changed by dramatic historical changes such as Russia's transition to state socialism. To do this Luria asked questions to three groups: peasants who still lived on farms relatively untouched by the revolution. These were compared to peasants who moved from the farms to factories in the cities as well as those going to schools in cities. What Luria found were very different answers given depending on whether people lived on farms or in cities and whether within the cities they went to school or worked in factories. It is very sad to me that more historians have not taken Luria up and developed socio-historical psychologies for different historical periods. I've attempted to this in my own work.

Alexander Luria's book *Cognitive Development: Its Cultural and Social Foundations* was published in 1976. Most of Luria's observational data was collected in the early 1930's during a time of radical restructuring in the Soviet Union. Alexander Luria was one of the founders of cultural-historical psychology. Luria wrote this book I believe to show the sociohistorical roots of all basic cognitive processes. Luria believed that the structure of thought depends upon the structure of the dominant types of activity in different cultures. This book was written at a time when there was an opportunity to observe how all of the reforms happening during this time not only changed the broadening of outlook but also changes in the structure of cognitive process. Luria's work was at the time very ground breaking. His work was primarily focusing on cross-cultural psychology. The aim of the research in this book was to analyze the sociohistorical shaping of mental processes. Luria focused primarily on cognitive processes like perception, deduction and inference, reasoning and problem solving, imagination, and self-analysis and self-awareness. Luria looked at the cultural development of undereducated minorities in a remote part of central Asia to collect his data. One of the main arguments of Luria in his book is that many mental processes are social and historical in origin. I thought that Luria did a very detailed job during the time period he was collecting data of creating a solid picture of the different types of cognitive processes humans go through of different cultural backgrounds. Each chapter in this book gives an account of the tools he used as a researcher to study his subjects. For each area of cognitive process, Luria would do tests with subjects he was studying. He first explains at the beginning of each chapter why it is important to do that particular cognitive process and explains the historical and cultural foundations of being able to perform a cognitive process. Luria then proceeds to demonstrate the cognitive process with his subjects and shows that data collected while working with them. I believe this book is very relevant to our time due to the fact that we live in a nation of hundreds of different cultures coinciding. Our classrooms are made up of students of different cultural backgrounds and historical backgrounds. This work can provide further insight to how students of different cultures and the history of their cultures play into their human consciousness and the process in which they learn. This book has helped me as an educator better understand how my students learn and how their cultural background and history play a role in how my students learn. It is also relevant to how we teach students and differentiate the instruction to meet their needs.

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