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# Lived experience, funds of identity and education

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to contribute to the discussion on *funds of identity*. First, we emphasize the extent to which history and time are constitutive dimensions of culture and experience and the affect this has on funds of identity and *meaning construction*. We then go on to explore some connections between *lived experience* and funds of identity. We prefer to use the term *lived experience* – rather than *emotional experience*, the term used by Nogueira (2014) – in order to emphasize (i) that cognition/thinking/meaning are inextricable from feeling/emotion/sense and (ii) that learning and experience are intrinsically situated in a matrix of life trajectories and ecological-transactional aspects throughout one's life. Finally, in light of the commentaries by Nogueira (2014) and Hviid and Villadsen (2014), we discuss the applicability of the concept of funds of identity in educational settings. Funds of identity are inscribed into artefacts – drawings, documents, images, tasks, etc. – and transported throughout the different sites connected to a person's life trajectory. In our view, these artefacts can be used as resources for establishing connections within schools and beyond them. This implies seeing the students' funds of identity as resources for learning and seeing schools as a context that must also be linked to other practices and activities in which people are involved.

## Keywords

Funds of identity, funds of knowledge, lived experience, education

Our only concern is that there exist within the very nature of the educational process, within its psychological essence, the demand that there be as intimate a contact, and as close an interaction, with life itself as might be wished for. Ultimately, only life educates, and the deeper that life, the real world, burrows into the school, the more

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dynamic and the more robust will be the educational process. That the school has been locked away and walled in as if by a tall fence from life itself has been its greatest failing. Education is just as meaningless outside the real world as is a fire without oxygen, or as is breathing in a vacuum. The teacher's educational work, therefore, must be inevitably connected with his (or her) creative, social, and life work.

(Vygotsky, 1926/1997, p. 345)

The interesting feedback provided in commentaries written by Ana Lúcia Horta Nogueira and Pernille Hviid and Jakob Waag Villadsen encourages us to continue the discussion on *funds of identity*. Both commentaries suggest taking into account the historical, developmental nature of the notion of funds of identity and we totally agree with this suggestion. In this sense, we would like to clarify what is meant by 'culture' in the *funds of knowledge* approach which has led to this idea of funds of identity. Nogueira (2014) emphasizes the subjectivity rooted in the synthesis of social and personal history. A complementary way to look at the same phenomena would be as follows: the process in which funds of identity are mediated semiotically by the meanings and sense provided by life practices and social interactions. All three of these authors stress the interwoven nature of educational practice and learners' funds of identity, i.e. the applicability of the concept in an educational setting. Indeed, to us, *funds of identity* are potential educational resources, mediational devices or 'acts of thought' which can provide the 'conceptual fabric' for the development of school aims, for instance: literacy development.

This paper is divided into four sections. First, we clarify the concept of *culture* embedded in our approach, emphasizing *time* as a core component of funds of identity. Second, we give reasons for using the term *lived experience* rather than *emotional experience* and the differences between lived experience and funds of identity. Third, we explore the relevance of the concept of funds of identity to school practice. Finally, we conclude with some suggestions that should be taken into account when using the term 'funds of identity' and ideas for further research relating to this concept.

### **The temporality of funds of identity**

One of the most exciting challenges in cultural psychology is how to theorize culture and subjectivity as being both socioculturally constituted (i.e. the public, interpersonal side) and embodied and experiential (i.e. the private, intrapersonal side). Vygotsky helps us in this sense by describing two steps in the development of the higher mental functions: the first is interpersonal (at the public and social level), and the second, intrapersonal (at the private, individual level).

The most important and the most fundamental of the laws that account for genesis and towards which we are led by the study of higher mental functions could be expressed as follows: each instance of semiotic behaviour by the child originated as

a form of social collaboration, which is why semiotic behaviour, even in the more advanced stages of development, remains a social mode of functioning. The history of the development of higher mental functions is thus seen to be the history of the process by which the tools of social behaviour are transformed into instruments of individual psychological organization. (Vygotsky, 1982, as cited in Ivic, 1994, p. 471)

However, the historicity of culture and subjectivity is sometimes misunderstood. As Compton-Lilly (2013) or Valsiner (2002), among others, stress, it is possible to consider time, or temporality, as a real context embedded in any human practice and as an inextricable aspect of the contexts in which people exist (*time as context* and *context* as both a source and setting of human activity). Thus, time is one dimension of our funds of identity. Indeed, funds of identity are appropriated throughout our life span from a vast range of semiotic resources that have been developed throughout history.

In this sense, Lemke (2000) has argued that people draw on experiences across multiple time scales as they make sense of experiences in the present (a 'dialectical synthesis of history at different levels' as Nogueira expresses it or the 'historicity of personal experiences' according to Hviid & Villadsen). Specifically, ongoing events and funds of identity are interpreted with reference to multiple timescales which include: previous lived experiences (i.e. life and learning experiences); past and present accounts of family members (funds of knowledge); historical accounts and also current political-social circumstances. For instance, it has recently been documented that funds of knowledge change in response to changes in people's social or living conditions, such as, the changes inherent in transnational lives and the changes in digital spaces and in the use of digital media by children (Esteban-Guitart, in press; Moll, Soto-Santiago, & Schwartz, 2013).

It is important to emphasize here that, in the *funds of knowledge* approach in the context of education, culture is characterized by household practices (what households actually do and how they think about what they do) that are formed and transformed within sociohistorical circumstances (González, 2005). In other words, rather than focussing on coherence within groups, on static group norms and static ideas of how people view the world (i.e. the 'Catalan' Culture, 'Islamic' Culture and so on), the focus is on the strategies and adaptations that households have developed over time, and the lived experiences of students and their families.

As one learns, for instance, about the social and labour histories of families, one gains, from their perspective, an understanding of their historical particulars, their economic grounding, the important lived experiences of adults and children, and their agency in creating new cultural practices to address new needs, all of which generate essential and varied funds of knowledge for family life. (Moll, 2014, p. 119)

This processual approach combines well with the use of qualitative, ethnographic and multi-autobiographical methods (Esteban-Guitart, 2012) that focus on the processes of everyday life, in the form of daily activities, i.e. the

manifestation of particular, historically accumulated funds of knowledge that households possess, and which are transformed and recreated as the funds of identity accumulated by students as a result of their learning trajectories, networks and prior experiences. This processual approach also combines well with an idiographic methodological approach that is sensitive to subjective experiences of the world (Salvatore, Valsiner, Simon & Gennaro, 2010). In contrast to a *nomothetic* approach, which tends to generalize and develop laws that explain objective phenomena in general, the *idiographic* approach is based on what Kant describes as a tendency to specify and to analyse empirically the meaning of contingent, unique and often subjective phenomena. In our case, this means what particular students and their families do and how they think about what they do – while also taking into account, of course, the macro cultural forces (e.g. social class, gender, religion and so on) that permeate the situation of these students and their families (Moll, 2014).

Meaning construction involves zooming in and out across multiple places and timescales to interpret experiences and construct sense and meaning. Analysing this temporality must acknowledge influences that are both *micro* (e.g. lived experiences) and *macro* (e.g. socio-political circumstances). In order to document the temporality that permeates a person's funds of identity, we need more 'longitudinal' accounts of their family funds of knowledge and, in the case of students, the trajectories of their funds of identity. That is to say, we need to document the experiences of adults (the source of the family's funds of knowledge) but also the knowledge and networks produced by children (their funds of identity). Children are active subjects who create specific *funds of knowledge* and *identity* for themselves through their social actions and transactions. In this respect, the extended 'multi-method autobiographical approach' (Esteban-Guitart, 2012) aims to detect the funds of identity of people at different stages of their lives by using different strategies and tasks connected with identity, such as self-portraits (or 'self-identity drawing') and meaningful circles, questions about the cultural artefacts people have in their homes or analysis of photographs or videos taken by participants in order to study their routines, ways of life and the contexts of their daily activities and their learning environment. We believe that further research into the *funds of knowledge* approach will benefit if it is able to incorporate various combined methodologies for studying *identity* in different situations and moments in time, thus overcoming the almost exclusive reliance on in-depth interviews. Furthermore, an emphasis on identity is needed to find ways to analyse and articulate the *micro* (lived experiences and stories) and the *macro* (political-social-economic circumstances).

To conclude, *time* is inherently part of our funds of identity at two levels, at least. First, funds of identity are resources or tool kits that are historically created, accumulated, disseminated and situated. For example, a smartphone is a mobile device produced historically as a result of accumulated transformations of prior technologies such as computers or feature phones. It is a device that appears in the Digital Age, the 'information economy' and contemporary life circumstances. This would be the *sociogenesis* (or historical-development and circumstances) of the

funds of identity (i.e. the moment in time embedded in the context of any practice, artefact or activity). Second, funds of identity are recreated and appropriated throughout our lives, or our life trajectories, which are embedded in particular social circumstances and activities. This would be the *ontogenesis* of our funds of identity (i.e. the time embedded in human development). This has been investigated, for example, by Gifre, Monreal and Esteban-Guitart (2011) who applied the self-portrait technique to people of different ages in order to analyse the content of the self-identity drawing at different stages of life.

### Lived experience and funds of identity

In her commentary, Nogueira (2014) recommends taking into account emotional experience (what Vygotsky called *perezhivanie*), semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, Valsiner), and the process of meaning and sense production – ideological, dialogical and multiple voiced (Bakhtin Circle) – to articulate the concept of *funds of identity*. In fact, we have situated the term *funds of identity* within the concept of *perezhivanie*, which is usually translated as *vivencia* in Spanish and as *emotional experience* or *lived experience* in English (Moll, 2014).

For us, *lived experience* – rather than *emotional experience* – is closer to Vygotskian ideas because it can account for the interrelation of all psychological functions and the mutual constitution of emotional acts and intellectual acts. Indeed, consciousness must be understood as the interrelation of all psychological functions (Vygotsky, 1962) and human development consists of changes in the interfunctional relationships between psychological abilities.

The separation of the intellectual side of our consciousness from its affective, volitional side is one of the fundamental flaws of all of traditional psychology. Because of it, thinking is inevitably transformed into an autonomous flow of thoughts thinking themselves. It is separated from all the fullness of real life, from the living motives, interests, and attractions of the thinking human. (Vygotsky, 1934, cited in Wertsch, 1985, p. 189)

Any lived experience, along with sense and meaning, is constructed across multiple ‘time scales’ (Lemke, 2000) throughout the trajectories of our lives. In our view, thinking and feeling are inextricable from each other and are embedded in practical circumstances. For us, subjectivity (lived experience) is a means by which we can capture funds of identity – the box of tools people use to define themselves. It is not, however, the only one. Some funds of identity may be invisible to the person in question. For example, digital media cannot appear in a self-portrait or meaningful circle (it cannot be a lived experience) but it can be embedded in any child’s routine and can be an important source of raw material for their identity: a real *digital fund of identity* (Esteban-Guitart, in press).

Therefore, we do not see *funds of identity* as entirely internal (i.e. they are not always phenomenologically visible), but as a process that takes place in interaction

with the environment, with people (family, friends, community) and things, with signs and tools distributed among artefacts and with the funds of knowledge available; all of this across various different places and times.

Hence, it is possible to say that lived experience (through semiotic mediation) is the phenomenological prism through which a person perceives and attributes values, senses and meanings to any funds of identity. However, funds of identity may not be visible by the person (this does not mean that they do not exist). The challenge is to document and analyse the box of tools that a specific person uses to give sense and meaning to the world. It can be said that *funds of identity* are ‘technologies of self’ – using Foucault’s expression – (Esteban-Guitart, 2014), that is, techniques (discourses, meanings, artefacts) that human beings use to understand and produce themselves, explicitly or implicitly.

Hasan (2002) makes a distinction that is useful here, between what she calls ‘invisible’ mediation – transparent, ubiquitous, mediational devices, such as an ideology embedded in sociocultural activities or forms of life that shape particular dispositions or habits of mind – and ‘visible’ mediation – deliberate in nature, requiring conscious reflection. ‘Invisible’ funds of identity may or may not appear in students identity texts such as the self-portrait.

### **Funds of identity as an educational tool for bridging the gap between in-school and out-of-school cultures, practices and learning experiences**

Schools should be interested in children’s funds of knowledge and funds of identity because there exists some consensus on what the Centre for Research on Education, Diversity & Excellence (CREDE) call ‘contextualization’, as one of the Standards for Effective Pedagogy and Learning. In regard to constructing meaning, contextualization involves connecting *school* (teaching and curriculum) to *students’ lives* (experiences and skills of home and community, that is, their specific funds of knowledge and funds of identity). In this regard, the culture-based teaching approach utilizes funds of knowledge and skills as a foundation for new knowledge – i.e. using ‘spontaneous concepts’ to help teach ‘scientific concepts’, in Vygotskian terminology.

For example, McIntyre, Kyle and Rightmyer (2005) described an experience to illustrate this approach based on the funds of knowledge approach. Through several visits, the teacher documented bodies of knowledge in regard to agriculture. In particular, a 7-year-old student showed knowledge about feeding, exercising and cleaning animals; in fact, she explained the life cycle of goats very well. This spontaneously learned concept could be usefully incorporated into a particular scientific concept such as the life cycle of organisms in general. Because a number of families in this classroom had knowledge related to farming (some were actual farmers), the teachers decided to teach an instructional unit on agriculture around the characteristics of mammals and their life cycles. For us, what is relevant in this example is that children, starting from spontaneous concepts, created a product – an

artefact – with new information that extended their prior knowledge and ideas. Specifically, the student created a ‘My Goats’ book for the classroom library. In this scenario, the topic began with the student’s family knowledge on farm animals and the student’s funds of identity in regard to goats.

A series of instructional cases of this model with various populations are described by Esteban-Guitart and Vila (2013), González, Moll and Amanti (2005) or McIntyre, Rosebery and González (2001). For instance, researchers and teachers of Haitian American students learned from the children’s skill with music and taught mathematical concepts through music; teachers of African American students learned about their cultural history and present day language practices to build instruction around the discourses the students use every day; teachers of Moroccan students in Catalonia (Spain) used their knowledge and abilities with Henna and decided to incorporate it into the arts curricula or, in another school context, soccer, which was used as a vehicle to develop geometry and maths.

What the concept of *funds of identity* adds to this approach is an empirical analysis of the abilities, knowledge and interests of students by means of identity strategies such as the self-portrait; this is then used to connect different contexts. In line with Hedges, Cullen and Jordan (2011), the aim is to document children’s interests – ‘funds of knowledge-based interests’ (p. 198) – and to use the findings as a basis for the children’s schooling. The challenge is to promote literacy engagement and promote the appropriation of scientific concepts through the creation of what Jim Cummins calls ‘identity texts’, which can be written, spoken, visual, musical, or any combination thereof (Cummins & Early, 2011), enabling students to use their home language or other cultural background artefacts as a resource for learning. Indeed, these ‘identity texts’ can reaffirm not only their home language but also the funds of knowledge available in the community and, specifically, the pupils’ own funds of identity (funds of knowledge incorporated in the students’ repertory of behaviours).

In a similar vein, and under the MacArthur Foundation umbrella, Mizuko Ito, Kris Gutiérrez, Sonia Livingstone, Bill Penuel and others have suggested an approach to education called ‘connected learning’ (‘learn from experience’) in order to overcome the gap between in-school and out-of-school learning in a Digital Age (Ito et al., 2013). According to these authors, formal education is often disconnected from the contexts in which students find meaning and social connection. This goes against the principle of contextualization which holds that, in order to be meaningful, learning should be part of peer-valued/peer-supported relationships, shared practices around common interests, grounded in what students already know and do outside school. Therefore, school should connect learning activities, identities and knowledge from within the school and beyond the school.

Connected learning is realized when a young person is able to pursue a personal interest or passion with the support of friends and caring adults, and is in turn able



to link this learning and interest to academic achievement, career success or civic engagement. This model is based on evidence that the most resilient, adaptive and effective learning involves individual interest as well as social support to overcome adversity and provide recognition. (Ito et al., 2013, p. 4)

This educational philosophy integrates and connects learning environments (such as school and museum) with the spheres of peers, interests and academic pursuits – characterized by a sense of shared purpose. Examples cited by Ito et al. include athletics programs that are tied to in-school recognition, certain arts and civic learning programs and interest-driven academic programs such as robotics competitions. Another example is the two-week ‘Boss Level’ period that takes place at the end of each trimester at Quest to Learn, (a 6th-to-12th-grade public school that opened in Manhattan in 2009), during which a number of challenges are given to students including, among other activities, making a Rube Goldberg machine; writing and performing short plays based on fairy tales; building a sculpture from recycled materials or constructing a travel website featuring three NYC neighbourhoods. Indeed, this is the first school in the USA to organize its entire curriculum so as to be ‘game-like’. It is also attempting to incorporate many of the connected learning principles into an urban public school (Ito et al., 2013, case study 4, pp. 35–39). However, in our view, it is important to emphasize the need to transport what people do in and outside schools in order to connect people’s learning experiences. For example, a bilingual book on a shared interest that travels from school to family and from family to friends.

In that sense, ‘the Integrating Background’ (the *Sfondo Integratore* described by Hviid & Villadsen) is an illustrative example of how to accomplish this using ‘traces’ of the children (engagements and interests such as children’s play themes or the toys they prefer). As funds of identity, ‘traces’ can be used by teachers to amplify and enlarge the students’ knowledge. For example, teachers can explore certain abuses by a consumerist society using favourite children’s toys, or explore toys from around the world and emphasize play as a learning activity rather than toys as objects to be consumed.

As Nogueira asserts, teachers should create opportunities to involve the students in a collective and critical process of meaning and sense production, in which the students can re-write aspects of their *funds of identity*. Using the words and the example provided by Hviid and Villadsen, teachers can take advantage of children’s traces at an individual and at a group level, creating and sharing stories, traces and narratives.

## Some final remarks

The intention behind the concept of *funds of identity* is to overcome certain limitations in the *funds of knowledge* approach. The first limitation is the primacy and exclusivity that is given to families as the focus of attention when documenting a student’s funds of knowledge. Nowadays, there are new social networks and new

funds of knowledge that are derived from the use of technology and from mobile, digital devices such as tablets and smartphones with countless applications. These constitute new contexts and environments for learning, for forming relationships and identities. Students may (or may not) incorporate funds of knowledge derived from their family histories but they also participate in other contexts of life and activity. The second limitation of the funds of knowledge approach is the fact that the ethnographic research carried out by teachers in visits made to their students' homes has been based almost exclusively on the use of interviews. The processual and qualitative nature of the funds of knowledge approach would be enhanced by incorporating visual methods such as the use of drawings, maps, photographs and videos created by the participants. These identity artefacts can go back and forth between the school and the family/community context so that, in addition to the information gathered by teachers or researchers, bridges can be built to connect what students do in school and what they do outside.

In our view, there is a series of challenges for the development and implementation of the proposed concept of funds of identity, namely:

1. The incorporation of Bakhtin's ideas, or even Foucault's, may help to find ways to understand and analyse the competence and the origin of the voices (discourses) that appear in the various funds of identity.
2. The analysis of the lived experiences of the participants must not exclude the influence of the social, economic and political circumstances in which they are documented.
3. In the taxonomy proposed for the funds of identity, there must be room for other cases arising from changing social circumstances, for example, work is needed on developing the concept of digital funds of knowledge and identity derived from the use of new, mobile and ubiquitous, digital technologies.
4. The educational use of identity texts should be carried out in such a way as to allow us to assess the impact on the learner of mediating classroom content through the use of identity tasks and activities. Ultimately, the idea is to place the identity of the learner at the centre of school activity, an identity that can expand and extend to contexts beyond the school.

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**Luis C Moll** is a Professor in the Language, Reading and Literacy Program in the Department of Teaching, Learning and Sociocultural Studies, College of Education, The University of Arizona (USA). Prior to joining the college in 1986, he was a research psychologist at the Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition of the University of California, San Diego. His main interest is the connection between psychology, culture and education, especially as it relates to the education of children in at-risk conditions. Among other studies, he has analysed the quality of classroom teaching, examined literacy instruction in English and Spanish, studied how learning takes place in the broader social contexts of household and community life, and attempted to establish pedagogical relationships among these domains of study. He has recently co-edited two books: *Funds of Knowledge: Theorizing Practices in Households, Communities, and Classrooms*

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