

Interview L.F. Obukhova (to the “Symbol drama” magazine)

Dear Colleagues,

In commemoration of Lyudmila Filippovna Obukhova, we publish an interview she gave to the “Symbol drama” magazine No. 1–2, 2012.



Lyudmila Filippovna Obukhova was born on 22nd July 1938, Candidate of Psychological Sciences (1972), Doctor of Psychological Sciences (from 1996), Professor (1997) of Moscow State University and MGPPU, Head of Educational Psychology Faculty at Moscow Psychological and Pedagogical University (1999), from 1974 she worked as Associate Professor, and from 1997 — as Professor of the Psychology Department at Moscow State University, the Faculty of Psychology, from 1996 she was a member of the Russian Academy of Natural Sciences (RANS), a winner of the Russian President’s Prize for major personal contribution to the development of the activity approach to the development of the mind (1997) She graduated from the Philosophical Faculty of Moscow State University in 1960, finished her post-graduate course in 1965. She became an MSU employee from 1960, UNESCO expert on “The Small Child and the Family” (from 1988 through 1990), a member of the Editorial Board of the journal “Moscow University Bulletin” Series: “Psychology”, a member of the Editorial Board of the journal “Psychological Science and Education”.

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The works by L.F. Obukhova are of paramount importance for organizing research activities in preschool education, for solving practical tasks of the development of children’s thinking, and for diagnosing the levels of cognitive activity of children.

In the field of fundamental theoretical and methodological studies, a system of possible interpretations of a child’s mental development is represented by L.F. Obukhova. There are two basic ways in the children’s psychology development, both implementing one of the existing paradigms of research, such as natural and scientific and cultural-historical. Comparative analysis of theories of child development allowed us to dissect their continuity and establish the logic of the process of the formation of the scientific knowledge about the driving causes of a child’s development.

L.F. Obukhova has conducted detailed analysis of the teachings by J. Piaget and questioned some of his provisions on an experimental basis. In order to study the specific features of a child’s thinking (J. Piaget phenomena) she applied the method of planned formation of mental actions worked out by P.Y. Galperin.

L.F. Obukhova participated in many studies on the mental development of children, the impact of family relationships on a child’s development. She participated in the long-term work with deaf-and-blind students of



the MSU Faculty of Psychology. As a member of Research Centre team “Preschool Childhood” named after A.V. Zaporozhets, she participated in the development of a pre-school education programme “Origins”, aimed at enriching (amplifying) a child’s mental development and realizing the full potential of each age period.

Ludmila Filippovna was both a scientist and a teacher, and a wonderful scientific promoter and organizer. On her initiative, with her support and participation, teaching and research work at many universities and educational institutions of Russia was launched, and it is being further developed (Arkhangelsk, Nizhny Novgorod, Surgut, Samara, Dubna, etc.)

L.F. Obuhova published over 70 scientific works, including articles in German, English, and French. Her main scientific works are as follows: “Stages of the Child’s Thinking Development” (1972), “The Concept of Piaget: Pros and Cons” (1981), “Contemporary American Developmental Psychology” (1986, combined work), “Forms and Functions of Imitation in Childhood” (1994, combined work), “A Child’s Psychology: Theories, Facts, Problems” (1995), “Jean Piaget: Theory, Experiments and Discussions” (2001), “Developmental Psychology: Coursebook for High Schools” (2006). Under the guidance of L.F. Obukhova over 30 PhD theses were successfully defended. Lyudmila Filippovna was the author of fundamental course book “Developmental Psychology”, which has already become a classic, and it is still being used by many students in studying psychology not only in Russia, but also abroad. Since 1994, the course book has been reprinted many times, the latest one being: L.F. Obukhova “Developmental Psychology”. – M. Yuright, Harvard Business Press, 2011.

1. Why did you, as a psychologist, choose the specialization that meant working with children?

In the beginning of my professional work, (in the 1960s), psychology was not differentiated in multiple directions, as it is today. Therefore the choice was limited: children’s, educational, medical psychology, psychophysiology, labour psychology. There were a few psychologists working in these areas, and all of them were dedicated scientists. Today, they are well-known all over the world. A.N. Leontyev, A.R. Luria, P.YA. Galperin, A.V. Zaporozhets, D.B. Elkonin, B.M. Teplov, Ye.N. Sokolov, all of them were my teachers. The scientist who had determined my way in life and career was Pyotr Ya-

kovlevich Galperin. He may be identified as the “Teacher from a Series of Wise Men”. At the time, he was the Head of the Children’s Psychology Department.

2. What do you think is the difference between the personality of a psychologist who works with children and a psychologist who works with adults?

What are the specific issues in of working with children? Any professional psychologist can work with children and with adults. He should have a good theoretical foundation so that he may be able to see, to listen and to hear, to be “observant”, to understand the signs of behaviour, which are not perceived by people who don’t have professional training, who usually do not pay attention to them. The psychological tools, which a specialist should have, also make a difference. While working with children at early stages of ontogenesis (infant, early, pre-school, primary school age), the concept of “development” should be used, so that it may guide the process in accordance with the appropriate age norm; while working with adults, who have already completed the development process, we may speak about therapy.

3. In your opinion, what is the difference between contemporary children and those who lived in the 20th century?

Contemporary children do not have to fetch water, to chop wood, to heat a stove, to wash dishes, to do the laundry. They have computers, mobile phones, e-books, game consoles, video training simulators, interactive toys and many more things. They are being taught to read and to write at an early age. Despite this abundance aimed at stimulating, accelerating mental development, contemporary children undergo the same stages of development of personality that have been outlined in the publications by Z. Freud, Erikson, A.N. Leontiev, D.B. Ilkonin. No significant transformations happened in mental development in the new century. One can observe just certain temporary fluctuations in the timescales for the emergence of some or other new psychological formations.

4. May I ask what kind of a child you used to be?

The war was in progress, I remember the sweet taste of raw potatoes, which were given to me by an unknown woman; my father was swollen with hunger; my mom was used to go down to the underground with me during the bombing; there were poorly-dressed people on the



Ludmila Filippovna with her Mom



Working on the book about J. Piaget



Among great teachers

streets during a harsh winter. There were no toys and books with coloured pictures. However, we had a gramophone, radio set, cards, skates, although one pair for two kids; in summer time we went to a summer camp based in a half-ruined monastery in Volokolamsk. The greatest pleasure for me was taking a sauna and listening to radio broadcasts. During childhood, we used to play a lot

together — cops and robbers, stander, mumble-the-peg, hopscotch, cards. We were together in the street and we were free! We had wonderful teachers at school, almost everyone had a favourite teacher. Valentina Aleksandrovna Sidorova, who taught the Russian language and literature, was a favourite teacher for me and my schoolmates. She taught us to write grammatically and to love the Russian language. Our teachers, in turn, empathised with us, children of the war.

5. What is your idea of happy childhood?

Happiness cannot be absolute or complete, even during childhood. The most important thing for a child is to develop properly, to live through each psychological age in a meaningful way, to carry out all activities typical of their age: to play, to draw, to design, to listen to fairytales, to help adults with the work around the house, to socialize with their peers, etc. In national psychology, such form of development is called amplification. It is exactly amplification of development, which is necessary to ensure a happy childhood. However, there is more to life than this. One cannot do without parental affection, which is an integral part of a happy childhood.