

**THEORY AND METHODOLOGY**  
**ТЕОРИЯ И МЕТОДОЛОГИЯ**

## L.S. Vygotsky on Giftedness as “A Higher Order Formation”<sup>1</sup>

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The author explores the concept of giftedness as presented in the published scientific manuscripts of L.S. Vygotsky and in the newly released psychological dictionary co-authored by him. This article emphasizes the importance of utilizing these archival sources for contemporary research on the issue of giftedness. Through a theoretical analysis, it highlights key ideas regarding the understanding of giftedness from the perspective of cultural-historical psychology: the necessity of distinguishing between individual psychological functions and giftedness; the notion of giftedness as a “formation of the higher order”, not reducible to the level of a separate function; the systems approach to studying giftedness; the role of the concept of development in elucidating the phenomenon of giftedness. The article also demonstrates the potential of L.S. Vygotsky for advancing research on research and enhancing practices.

**Keywords:** giftedness; cultural giftedness; zone of proximal possibilities; personality; intelligence; creative productivity.

**For citation:** Fedorova E.P. L.S. Vygotsky on Giftedness as “A Higher Order Formation”. *Kul'turno-istoricheskaya psikhologiya = Cultural-Historical Psychology*, 2024. Vol. 20, no. 4, pp. 88–93. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2024200410>

## Л.С. Выготский об одаренности как «образовании высшего порядка»<sup>2</sup>

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Рассматривается представление об одаренности в опубликованных научных рукописях Л.С. Выготского и во вновь изданном первом психологическом словаре, соавтором которого он являлся. Автор обосновывает актуальность обращения к открывшимся архивным источникам для современных исследований проблемы одаренности. В ходе теоретического анализа выделены ключевые идеи в понимании одаренности с позиции культурно-исторической психологии: необходимость различения отдельных психологических функций и одаренности; понимание одаренности как «образования высшего порядка», не сводимого к высоте отдельной функции; системный подход к исследованию одаренности, роль понятия развития и значение социальной ситуации развития для раскрытия феномена одаренности. Демонстрируется потенциал идей Л.С. Выготского для исследований одаренности и образовательной практики.

<sup>1</sup> Zapisnye knizhki L.S. Vygotskogo. Izbrannoe [Vygotsky's Notebooks. Selected Works]. Ed. by E. Zavershneva and R. van der Veer. Moscow: Канон+; РООИ «Реабилитация», 2017. P. 182. (In Russ.)

<sup>2</sup> Записные книжки Л.С. Выготского. Избранное / Под общ. ред. Е. Завершневой и Р. ван дер Веера. М.: Канон+; РООИ «Реабилитация», 2017. — С. 182.

**Ключевые слова:** одаренность, культурная одаренность, зона ближайших возможностей, личность, интеллект, творческая продуктивность.

**Для цитаты:** Федорова Е.П. Л.С. Выготский об одаренности как «образовании высшего порядка» // Культурно-историческая психология. 2024. Том 20. № 4. С.88–93. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.17759/chp.2024200410>

## Introduction

The understanding of giftedness has evolved significantly throughout the history of psychological science. Researchers observe that conceptions of giftedness have paralleled major developments in psychological knowledge. Today, the issue of giftedness remains central in contemporary research and is still far from resolved [9, p. 20; 15–20].

Modern psychological literature often bases its concepts of giftedness on methodological positions that diverge from cultural-historical theory. This divergence is evident in the works of scholars such as D.B. Bogoyavlenskaya, A.A. Melik-Pashayev, A.I. Savenkov, M.L. Ivleva, V.I. Panov, N.B. Shumakova, E.Yu. Shcheblanova, and V.S. Yurkevich [1; 8; 10; 11; 14–20]. In analyzing both foreign and domestic approaches to the study of giftedness, L.S. Vygotsky is frequently referenced. However, his ideas are often cited without thorough exploration, with statements such as “somewhat different ideas are the basis of the approaches of Vygotsky and his followers” or mere references to “Vygotsky’s original idea of plus- and minus-giftedness” [8, p. 3]. Additionally, references are made to fundamental principles of Vygotsky’s approach, including the social determinacy of child personality development. Certain aspects of cultural-historical psychology are emphasized, for example: “If we know how strength arises from weakness, and abilities from shortcomings, then we have the key to the problem of children’s giftedness” [8; cited from: 7, p. 159]. The research of Vygotsky and his followers is characterized as “potentialistic,” within which “giftedness is considered as a genetically determined component of abilities that can develop in appropriate activity, or degrade in its absence, i.e., as a potential that can be actualized under certain conditions that do not depend on the subject himself” [8, p. 13].

Rather than debating the completeness and accuracy of these interpretations of Vygotsky’s ideas, it is more productive to turn directly to the original concepts proposed by the founder of cultural-historical psychology. This is especially pertinent today, as we celebrate the 100th anniversary of cultural-historical psychology and as Vygotsky’s works are being republished, including several lost manuscripts. V.P. Zinchenko has noted that

“for psychological science, Vygotsky’s ideas about development are not the past, but the still insufficiently understood and acquired present. According to Vygotsky, this is a ‘current future field’ for psychology” [7, p. 8].

Researchers studying giftedness often rely on Vygotsky’s earlier, classic works, primarily his book *Imagination and Creativity in Childhood* (1930) [5]. We propose turning to newly discovered sources. Notably, these include *L.S. Vygotsky’s Notebooks: Selected Works*, edited by E. Zavershneva and Ren van der Veer, published in 2017 [6]. This work has attracted significant attention from researchers, as it is the first publication of Vygotsky’s manuscripts based on a thorough study of archival sources. Emphasizing the importance of this publication for current Vygotsky studies, A.D. Maidansky writes: “The ‘archival revolution’ initiated by E.Yu. Zavershneva—the restoration of his works damaged by Soviet editors, the republication of his old texts, practically unknown to readers, scattered across long-forgotten journals and collections—has created a ‘new reality’ in cultural-historical psychology” [13, p. 6]. The problem of giftedness is no exception. Therefore, it is timely to revisit how Vygotsky understood giftedness.

## Results and discussion

On the eve of the International Round Table dedicated to the 100th anniversary of cultural-historical psychology, the first Russian psychological dictionary of 1931, compiled by Vygotsky and B.E. Varshava, was reissued. It provides the following definition: “Giftedness is a term denoting the level of psychological or intellectual development, the level and quality of predispositions, inclinations, and abilities” [12, p. 79]. This characterization reflects the psychological knowledge of that time, where Vygotsky listed types of giftedness and described how other researchers understood the term, including E. Clapar de, W. Stern, A. Binet, and Ch. Spearman.

At the end of the entry, Vygotsky added: “The practical definition of giftedness comes down to identifying the level of intellectual development using tests (Binet, Moede, Stern, etc.)” [12, p. 79]. The phrase “comes down to” indicates Vygotsky’s skeptical attitude toward common testing methods used to identify and measure gift-

edness, such as the “complex of high and low IQ symptoms.” He refrained from more specific assessments, as they would require arguments unsuitable for a brief dictionary entry.

In *L.S. Vygotsky's Notebooks: Selected Works*, there is a section titled “Giftedness,” spanning about five pages and containing the main theses of Vygotsky's concept [6, pp. 179–183]. The notes in this section likely date back to 1930, when Vygotsky held an internal conference on giftedness with his colleagues and postgraduates. Analyzing these brief notes is somewhat challenging, as they were personal and not intended for publication. Nevertheless, we have attempted to understand the thoughts and essential characteristics of giftedness that Vygotsky wanted to convey.

Vygotsky defines giftedness as “a higher-order formation, similar to characterological formations” [6, p. 179]. Commentators draw attention to the emergence of the term “zone of proximal opportunities,” which later evolved into the well-known “zone of proximal development.” Vygotsky considers this point “the most important,” highlighting it in the margins with a square bracket and four vertical lines.

The concept of giftedness characterizes the immediate prospects of personality development, including psychological functions and abilities. Vygotsky views the social environment as the source of development; therefore, giftedness is a socio-historical trait of human personality, not an individual-natural one. It is society — the people who surround an individual and are open to cooperation — that determines the “zone of proximal opportunities” for cultural development, that is, giftedness in the true sense. Thus, the traditional idea of innate giftedness (or lack thereof) is decisively rejected. The old myth of the “heaven-gifted” stems from a misunderstanding of the cultural and historical nature of human abilities, which are fundamentally different from those of animals.

Psychologists have tried to explain the phenomenon of giftedness by equating it with memory (G. Ebbinghaus), intelligence (E.L. Thorndike), and other psychological functions. Vygotsky disputes the understanding of giftedness as a specific psychological function or mode of activity: “Giftedness is not a psychological activity, but an understanding of practical activity” [6, p. 181]. It is neither “an intelligence trait (depth, power, ability), nor its moment or state (rudiment)... nor intelligence as a whole, nor anything new at the center. It is intelligence in the context of personality” [6, p. 182].

To correctly interpret this statement, it is essential to consider that, for Vygotsky, personality is “the social in us,” meaning social relations internalized into the psyche, becoming individual psychological functions. In

Vygotsky's theory, the concept of giftedness characterizes the social situation of personality development as a system of relationships between the child and the environment. “The key to the complex structure of giftedness is in development” [6, p. 182; 3, p. 210].

Therefore, when measuring giftedness, it is necessary to consider and evaluate both the nature and level of development of the child's relationships with others and the already acquired personal traits.

Emphasizing a “systemic point of view on giftedness,” Vygotsky further clarifies his idea: “The essence is not in thinking, but in the management of thinking, in mastering it, in using it—that is, in the personal characteristics of intelligence... Giftedness is not determined by the level of individual functions; it is not a function, but a higher-order formation, similar to characterological formations” [6, p. 182; emphasis in the original].

Characterological traits are those that define a unique personality. Vygotsky parallels giftedness with “the productivity of a child's character traits,” or, in other words, with the presence of a “creative moment” in a child's practical activity. In the *Psychological Dictionary*, talent is defined as “an innate high special giftedness in some area, expressed in creative productivity” [12, p. 110]. In this sense, Vygotsky refers to giftedness as “a highest-order formation.” Creative activity represents the pinnacle of human development in general, and the same applies to any area of culture and to every individual. Children may share similar character traits, such as attentiveness or sociability, but their giftedness differs, according to Vygotsky.

In *L.S. Vygotsky's Notebooks: Selected Works*, there is a mention of “our understanding of giftedness in ‘The Etudes’” [6, p. 182], referring to the book *The Etudes in the History of Behavior* (1930), co-authored by Vygotsky and A.R. Luria. The preface indicates that Luria authored the third chapter, whose last two paragraphs are titled “Mental Retardation and Giftedness” and “Assessment of Giftedness and the Problem of Cultural Development.” However, in a letter dated July 23, 1929, Vygotsky complains to A.N. Leontiev that he had to extensively revise Luria's chapter, as it was “written entirely according to the Freudians..., then the impenetrable Piaget, absolutized out of all proportions; and then method and sign are mixed together, and so on and so forth” [2, p. 18]. The printed version of the book lacks these issues, suggesting that Vygotsky revised the concept of cultural giftedness to align with his own understanding.

Special studies have shown that the deeper the intellectual disability, the better the natural physiological functions of the sense organs may work (and sometimes even the memory of individuals with intellectual disabili-

ities). “Therefore, retardation is a defect not only in natural processes but in their cultural use... The defects of a mentally retarded child are primarily in the lack of ability to use natural abilities” [4, p. 213]. Here, giftedness is defined as the ability to rationally use one’s natural inclinations and abilities, achieving optimal results with the help of cultural techniques and means developed throughout history. The importance of the practical application of intellectual functions in child development is particularly emphasized.

Scientific and educational literature often differentiates between general and special giftedness. Vygotsky and Luria regard the term “general giftedness” as abstract and meaningless, although various special forms of giftedness share a common element: the ability to effectively manage one’s natural predispositions. This ability is a cultural achievement, not a gift of nature; therefore, Vygotsky and Luria use the term “cultural giftedness” instead of “general giftedness,” commonly accepted in Russian psychological literature (international literature refers to it as “intellectuality”).

Depending on the cultural means used to transform and develop natural functions, different forms of special giftedness are formed. Highly gifted individuals in one area often lack giftedness in another, even if both areas require the same natural predispositions, such as reaction speed, sensory acuity, attention, and memory.

Reviewing widely used tests for general giftedness in children—particularly G.I. Rossolimo’s “psychological profile” and A. Binet’s diagnostic scale — Vygotsky and Luria note that these questionnaires mix questions of entirely different natures and merely record the current state of the psyche without considering the practical application of certain predispositions and abilities. Alongside innate psychophysiological functions, a child’s cultural skills and level of knowledge in various areas are examined. Natural predispositions themselves are not significantly developed and only up to a certain age, while awareness grows at a much faster rate; the same applies to skill development. Moreover, limited natural abilities are known to stimulate the development of corresponding psychological functions, which can compensate (and sometimes overcompensate) for innate disabilities. This is especially noticeable in cases of evident physical impairments.

As a result of conflating natural and cultural aspects of development, widely used testing methods produce “an undifferentiated combination of natural evaluative abilities and school knowledge” [4, p. 220]. The resulting diffuse pattern is presented as a measurement of “general giftedness” or a coefficient of general intellectual development. This issue persists in contemporary tests as well.

Vygotsky and Luria propose a two-stage program for studying individual giftedness. First, it is necessary to assess “the degree of natural predispositions, the age-related state of neuropsychic activity, the entire basis of natural neurodynamics.” Only then should one study “the structure of cultural processes, the degree of awareness, the wealth of knowledge... The task of a psychologist is to study all of these aspects with sufficient accuracy and determine a coefficient of this ‘cultural development’ in each individual” [4, p. 222].

## Conclusions

The key conclusion drawn from analyzing L.S. Vygotsky’s notebooks on phenomenon of giftedness is that Vygotsky understood development as a key point. He emphasizes the close correlation between intellect and personality, proposing that giftedness should be considered as formation different from psychological functions, characterizing activity in terms of its creative productivity.

Recognizing the complexity and significance of giftedness within the field of psychology, Vygotsky encourages future researchers to adopt a systemic approach to its study. This approach aligns with the multidimensional nature of the phenomenon and considers the social context of personality development.

Thus, the analysis of Vygotsky’s notes on giftedness, along with the insightful comments of E. Zavershneva and Ren van der Veer, gives us better understanding of his work *The Etudes in the History of Behavior*. Vygotsky elucidates the concept of giftedness through a critical examination of previous and contemporary studies.

Vygotsky’s heritage encompasses a complex array of unique scientific ideas regarding the issue of giftedness, which is not fully understood. According to V.E. Klochko, when examining the problem of giftedness from the “post-non-classical” perspective of psychological science development, Vygotsky’s work demonstrates a significant interdisciplinarity and continues to shape the contemporary landscape of psychological science [9, pp. 62–63; 10; 11; 15].

Coming back to the published manuscripts of Vygotsky and his republished scientific works, rereading them without omissions or excessive editorial interference, will enable researchers to reevaluate the theoretical foundations of this field and develop fundamentally new programs for studying giftedness. Consequently, educational practitioners working with gifted children will be able to ground their work in the rich scientific potential of cultural-historical psychology.

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Получена 29.09.2024

Принята в печать 10.12.2024

Received 29.09.2024

Accepted 10.12.2024