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On the system of categories of the cultural-historical psychology

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Abstract

The article discusses the systemic structure of cultural-historical psychology (CHP). At its “core” lies the concept of personality as “the social within us,” introduced by L.S. Vygotsky in contrast to the traditional notion of personality as a collection of individual psychological traits. By identifying a number of system-forming categories of the CHP, the authors examine their interrelations and their role in the formation and development of this theoretical framework. It is demonstrated that, by arriving at understanding of personality as a “psychological system,” Vygotsky laid the foundation for a “systemic perspective” on the processes of development and disintegration of higher psychological functions. His theory belongs to the Copernican type of scientific systems, as it incorporates the “movement of the observer” — cultural-historical development of human personality.

Keywords: system, cooperation, vraschivanie, sign mediation, zone of proximal development (ZPD), perezhivanie, affect, personality

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О системе категорий культурно-исторической психологии

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Резюме

В статье обсуждаются особенности системного строения культурно-исторической психологии (КИП). Ее «твердым ядром» является понятие личности как «социального в нас», введенное Л.С. Выготским в противоположность традиционному понятию личности как совокупности психологических черт индивида. Выделяя ряд системообразующих категорий культурно-исторической психологии, авторы рассматривают их взаимосвязь и роль в процессе становления и развития этой теории. Показано, что, выйдя на понимание личности как «психологической системы», Выготский тем самым закладывает «системную точку зрения» на процессы развития и распада высшей психики. Его теория принадлежит к коперниканскому типу научных систем, поскольку в ней учитывается «движение наблюдателя» — культурно-историческое развитие человеческой личности.

Ключевые слова: система, сотрудничество, вращивание, знаковое опосредствование, зона ближайшего развития, переживание, аффект, личность

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The true is real only as a system.
Georg Hege

The problem we now turn to — complex and far-reaching — can hardly be resolved within the limits of a single article. Aware of this, we have chosen to focus primarily on the systemic structure of CHP and several of its key, system-forming categories, in order to clarify the role each plays in the development of this research program.

1. Personality as “the social within us”

It is well known that in creating a “new psychology of the human,” L.S. Vygotsky relied on the categorical system of *Capital*, which reflects, in logically pure form, the system of bourgeois productive relations. This system has its own elementary “cell” — the commodity. In the earliest surviving draft of the CHP system, Vygotsky draws an analogy between the commodity and personality (the “I”). Both are “sensuous-supersensuous” things, i.e., social in nature. Personality is constructed in the image of social relations between people: “The I is the social within us” (Vygotsky, 2017, p. 112).

The concept of personality does not describe the totality of all psychological traits of an individual (as is still often assumed today), but only and exclusively *the highest, sociogenic layer* of the psyche. The idea of the social nature of personality forms the cornerstone of CHP, or, in Vygotsky’s own words, “the key to the psychology of the human being.”

The “substance” of commodity relations, according to Marx, is human labor. All other economic categories appear as “modes” of this universal substance, and capital itself is nothing other than “objectified labor.” Marx’s teaching, like social life itself, revolves around this “sun of labor.” It is in the course of this process that both personality and the commodity emerge — indeed, all specifically human (cultural) forms of behavior and psychic life.

Vygotsky adopts this axiom of the materialist understanding of history: “Labor was the cradle of all higher psychological functions, of all the highest forms of behavior specific to humans” (Vygotsky, 1935 p. 38).

Vygotsky’s breakthrough was the discovery of a *parallel between the tool of labor and the sign* — above all, the word. Just as tools gave humans power over external nature, signs made it possible to actively transform both others’ and one’s own psyche, to regulate behavior and inner life. This technology of self-regulation constitutes the psychological advantage of humans compared to animals.

According to A.N. Leontiev, we know that Vygotsky made this discovery at the end of 1924 or the beginning of 1925. A year later, he elaborated on the idea of the “in-

strumentality of the word” in a notebook written during his stay at the hospital in Zakharyino:

“So, the difference of the word: it is an artificially created stimulus (cf. technique), it is a tool of behavior... Speech behavior differs from non-speech behavior as labor differs from animal adaptation... The word is a special stimulus for regulation, for organizing behavior — both others’ and one’s own.” (Vygotsky, 2017, pp. 106–107).

Vygotsky then declares his break with reactology: the psyche is a form of *active*, not reactive, behavior. It filters the flow of external stimuli, selecting those that make it possible to act more effectively.

“It is an organ of selection, a sieve-sifter, transforming the world so that it becomes possible to act. This is its positive function... The selection of truly higher forms takes place in the psyche. Red, blue, loud — it carves the world into portions so that I can eat it without breaking my teeth.” (Vygotsky 2017, p. 129).

Living activity, which actively “devours” the world, is the “sun” around which the psyche revolves, including the human soul. True, Vygotsky does not state this conclusion directly. It was further developed within CHP by A.N. Leontiev and his colleagues (Leontiev, 1974; Leontiev 1981). Still, even Vygotsky was already studying the “genetic knots uniting the child’s thinking and practical activity,” and this activity is understood by him as *the foundation and driving force* of the development of thinking.

If the psyche is a form of active engagement with the external world, then any change in the nature of this activity leads to a transformation in the character of psychic life. When activity, in its development, rises to the level of labor, it is precisely in the context of labor that higher forms of the psyche arise — along with their artificial tools: signs. Like its “substance” — labor — human psychic life is both social and artificial. Personality is not a gift of nature; it is created by people themselves through the use of signs, from the “raw material” of natural psychological functions.

In Vygotsky’s notes from 1926, we already find a fully formed “hard core” of the theoretical system that would later come to be known as cultural-historical psychology. Thanks to these notes, we can observe *the birth of the CHP system*.

2. Cooperation

Scientific systems do not arise from nothing — *ex nihilo* — especially not in the human sciences. Cooperation is a category that links Cultural-Historical Psychology (CHP) to the historical epoch in which Vygotsky lived and worked. It was a time of a great dream: the vision of a world commune founded on “planned cooperation”

(Marx)¹. The idea of cooperation was, quite literally, in the air. For example, P.P. Blonsky was developing his own “system of cooperation” for adolescents in the second stage of labor school.

It is not difficult to demonstrate the system-forming character of the category of cooperation within the conceptual framework of CHP: we encounter it in the formulation of the general genetic law of cultural development of the psyche, in the definition of the zone of proximal development, and in the foundations of Vygotsky’s special pedagogy, which teaches the “overcoming of defect” through cooperation.

At the same time, the category of cooperation is not, strictly speaking, specific to CHP. It is not a concept that emerges from within cultural-historical theory itself; rather, it is the soil out of which the tree of cultural-historical theory grew — alongside many other psychological and pedagogical systems. For instance, in Chapter 2 of *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky critically discusses the role of the concept of cooperation in Jean Piaget’s theory of the development of children’s thinking (based on the scheme: egocentrism → constraint → cooperation).

Vygotsky began using the category of cooperation from the earliest stages of his scholarly work — even before his engagement with reactology and prior to his move to Moscow. In his very first academic publication (a collection prepared in Gomel and printed at a local press), Vygotsky argues against the “individual-craftsman” model of educating blind children:

“Such labor does not train for cooperation... Cooperation with sighted individuals must become the foundation of labor education. Upon this foundation, true communication with the sighted can emerge, and labor will become the narrow doorway through which the blind child enters life. Create healthy labor — and all else will follow.” (Vygotsky, 1924, p. 20)

In essence, Vygotsky directly links the concept of cooperation with labor and the labor education of children. “Healthy labor” includes cooperation as an integral attribute. In this respect, Vygotsky’s understanding of cooperation is fundamentally different, for example, from that of P. Janet, who viewed a wolf pack’s hunt as an example of “true cooperation” (*une véritable collaboration*).

In his mature period, Vygotsky came to regard cooperation as the mode of cultural development that is uniquely human. In relation to consciousness as a whole, and to each psychological function in particular, cooperation is *the starting point* of development — the very first, “interpsychological” stage. “Every higher psychological function was once a form of psychological cooperation,” Vygotsky tirelessly repeated (Vygotsky, 1924, p. 20).

In the postwar period of CHP’s history, research primarily advanced along the line of concretizing the

concept of cooperation. This work gave rise to several new concepts, such as task-oriented communication (A.I. Meshcheryakov), joint distributed action, and jointly distributed (learning) activity (V.V. Davydov, V.V. Rubtsov), among others.

Today, the category of cooperation / joint activity has been most thoroughly developed in the research of V.V. Rubtsov, who grounded *the socio-genetic method* for studying the development of children’s concepts in relation to the organization of learning interactions². In the work of V.V. Ageev, Yu.V. Gromyko, R.Ya. Guzman, A.G. Kritsky, A.V. Konokotin, and other followers of socio-genetic psychology — drawing on the system of core concepts from CHP and activity theory — experimental data have been obtained that describe in detail the organization of joint action. These studies also reveal the psychological characteristics of various forms of interaction (cooperation) between child and adult, as well as among children themselves, and their correlation with the development of cognitive and communicative-reflexive processes.

At its core, the conceptual design of the socio-genetic method rests on a fundamental law formulated by L.S. Vygotsky, according to which social interactions (“social relations,” or later, “joint activity”) are not a factor of development, but it’s *very source*: “Behind all higher functions and their development stand *genetically social relations — real relations among people, Homo duplex* (Latin: ‘the double human’)” (Vygotsky, 1986, p. 54; emphasis in original — *Authors*).

Two key points should be emphasized here. *First*, as G.A. Zuckerman stresses, “...social relations are not the space or conditions of development, but the very substance of the interpsychological function — that which exists *between* people, belonging to no one. The interpsychological does not appear in relationships; it is the relationship” (Tsukerman, 2006, pp. 61–73). Indeed, as Vygotsky put it, “Every higher psychological function was once external because it was social before becoming internal, genuinely psychological; it was initially a social relation between two people” (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 145). *Second*, in Vygotsky’s conception, the word genetic derives not from “genetics” but from genesis — that is, development. And this development is not understood as a simple accumulation of certain characteristics or quantitative growth, but as a process of qualitative transformation. In other words, Vygotsky clearly indicated that it is precisely real, that is, living, developmental relationships — interactions between people — that determine the nature of the qualitative changes which will constitute the child’s emerging psychological functions. “...The course of one internal process depends on the emergence

¹ “In planned cooperation with other workers, the laborer dissolves individual boundaries and develops their species-wide potentials” (Marx, 2017, p. 356).

² For further details, see: (Rubtsov, 2024).

and flow of another” (Rubtsov, 2006, pp. 14–24). Such an understanding of the connection between social interaction and development inevitably led researchers to address the problem of identifying effective ways of organizing joint activity – among children, between children and adults, and among children themselves.

In V.V. Rubtsov’s research, based on the experimental method “Ring of Objects,” connections were analyzed between the nature and mode of children’s interaction during the process of solving a learning task (cooperation) and the level of development of operational structures associated with the intellectual operation of class inclusion (Rubtsov, 1996, pp. 99–110). As a result, different types of cooperation were identified, each reflecting specific modes of joint action that serve as indicators of cooperation under conditions of distributed activity among participants.

Cooperation based on orientation to a single feature of a structural element. This type of cooperation was characterized by participants focusing primarily on the possibility of completing their own individual operation. They did not identify connections between individual operations, nor did they treat such connections as the subject of special analysis. As a result, the “shared” task was divided into a series of independent tasks that each participant solved on their own, without regard for the developing sequence of others’ actions.

Cooperation based on orientation to two features of a structural element. This form of cooperation involved overcoming the focus on individual operations. Children regarded the overall result of the task as dependent on the sequence of mutually substitutable individual operations. However, this sequence and interdependence, as identified by the participants, remained rigidly tied to the specific conditions of the task. As a result, they were unable to regard the mode of interaction itself as a shared strategy for joint problem-solving.

Cooperation based on orientation to the connection between features of structural elements. In this form of cooperation, children identified the organization of joint activity itself as a distinct task. The way this activity was organized became a subject of explicit analysis and reflection.

Overall, the study showed that the formation of scientific concepts is not possible in “cooperation” or “communication” in general, but only within certain forms of cooperation – specifically, when (1) the very mode of organizing joint activity becomes the subject of participants’ analysis, and (2) such analysis mediates the process of solving the material task.

These results were further specified in a study by V.V. Rubtsov and A.V. Konokotin (Rubtsov, Konokotin, 2020), who examined the specific features of children’s interaction strategies during joint task-solving in balance experiments. They succeeded in tracing the dynamics of the emergence of joint action and demonstrated that the interconnection of communication processes,

action exchange, mutual understanding, and reflection serves as an indicator of children’s entry into cooperation. This cooperation is characterized by specific ways of jointly solving tasks and by the distinctive structure of emergent child – adult co-communities (*soobschnost’*).

According to the data, it is justified to distinguish four types of interaction, and correspondingly, four types of cooperation among children, which determine the process of concept formation in the context of joint activity:

Pre-organizational type of interaction is largely comparable to the first type of cooperation previously described. In this case, the process of solving the task and its result appeared to the children as the product of their individual activity. There was no purposeful communication. Verbal utterances did not refer to the content of the task. Participants were primarily focused on overcoming the limitations of performing individual actions within the material field of the task. Individual operations were treated as independent from one another.

Reflection, when it did occur in this type of interaction, was expressed as *egocentric speech* or as concrete actions aimed at (1) evaluating the outcome of one’s own action, (2) evaluating the outcome of a partner’s action, or (3) analyzing the potential connection between one’s own action and the partner’s.

Organizational type of interaction. In this form, the characteristics of cooperation observed in the previous stage became more specific. Communication began to develop, aimed at regulating the interaction process, and reflection emerged that supported analysis of the possibilities for transforming the task field based on the integration of individual actions. In addition, participants began to shift from reflecting solely on the outcome of their individual actions toward orienting themselves to the joint action as a whole. They began to understand the shared result as a way of coordinating individual operations.

These emerging processes of communication and reflection became the foundation for mutual understanding – that is, for comprehending each participant’s intentions regarding the method for solving the material task. However, while the children began integrating their individual operations, the mode of organizing the joint action itself did not yet become a subject of analysis. As a result, this organizational type of interaction remained unstable and often broke down into isolated individual actions.

Organizational-reflective type of interaction. This type is characterized by a transformation in the object of the task: the object of the task became, for the participants, the mode of interaction itself. This new, qualitatively different task began to mediate the solution of the material task, which, in turn, served as the condition for identifying essential relationships within the object or phenomenon under study.

The nature of communication also changed, acquiring the form of participants jointly discussing their understanding of how the behavior of the object being

studied changes in connection with transformations in the mode of cooperation. This type of interaction can be regarded as specifically educational, enabling participants to go beyond the limits of the “zone of proximal development” set by the adult. In this form of collaboratively overcoming difficulties, participants did not simply master discrete knowledge or skills but acquired ways of organizing joint activity itself. These ways define cooperation — between children and with the adult — as the very medium of problem-solving.

Pseudo-organizational type of interaction. This form of interaction outwardly resembles the organizational type of cooperation, but the “real” interaction is substituted by the activity of one participant, who takes over the initiative in solving the task, while merely “using” the partner’s potential.

The key conclusion drawn by the authors of the study was that the modes of interaction characterizing cooperation in joint activity are intrinsically linked to the content of the emerging concept (in this case, “balance”). Participants who demonstrated an organizational and reflective-analytical mode of interaction were able to formulate a general rule for solving balance problems and to identify a shared principle for solving this class of tasks. At the same time, while participants with an organizational interaction style primarily relied on the rule “weight + distance,” those who exhibited a reflective-analytical mode were guided by the multiplication rule “weight × distance.” These data once again confirmed that modes of cooperation are directly related to the nature and content of the concepts being formed. Cooperation, when it is specific to educational contexts, takes place within special forms of *obschnost* that are marked by mutual understanding and by participants’ grasp of the adult’s intention in structuring the “zone of proximal development.”

3. Sign-mediated action and *vraschivanie* (ingrowing)

From a psychological standpoint, every process of cooperation is mediated by tools and/or signs. A sign emerges as a means of influencing another person’s behavior. The word, in particular, was originally a “command for others” (an idea Vygotsky drew from Janet).

Once it has fulfilled its mediating function in cooperation, “the tool becomes unnecessary. *The activity moves inward,*” Vygotsky wrote in pencil on a scrap of paper. “*Ingrowing [vraschivanie] at first completely replicates the instrumental act inside — but later there are reductions, shortcuts, and deep transformations*” (Vygotsky, 2017, pp. 159–160).

Sometimes, a mental image of the tool remains (e.g., a mnemonic map or verbal “stimulus-means” such as a

counting rhyme, proverb, or prayer); sometimes, a symbolic tool is created (numbers, hieroglyphs, letters, musical notation); and sometimes the tool vanishes without a trace — what remains is only the pure scheme of the activity, and the entire act appears once again as direct and unmediated.

According to Vygotsky, there are three main types of *vraschivanie* of the instrumental act into the psyche³:

From this point forward, the individual becomes capable of *cooperating with themselves*, in their inner world — a world that arises precisely as a result of the ingrowing of external, interpsychological forms of cooperation. *Vraschivanie* creates the “semantic field” where the personal life of the mind unfolds: inaudible dialogues are held, actions are contemplated, processes of reflection and self-awareness take place. It transforms raw natural material — affects and innate psychological functions (orienting and speech-related, the two “signal systems”) — into higher psychological functions. Just as one cannot build a boat or raft without material that floats, higher psychological functions can only be constructed from appropriate “natural” or “elementary” components, as Vygotsky put it.

The resistance of “nature” leads to a sharp reduction and simplification of cultural forms of activity at the initial stages of *vraschivanie*. Some of them “get stuck” part-way through their internalization process, unable to complete the “path inward” (Vygotsky). Silent reading, for instance, was rare even in Ancient Greece and Rome. For a child and their mentor — always in joint effort — it takes considerable work to “liberate” a psychological function from the grip of *gestalts* and practical action schemes.

After Vygotsky, the concept of *vraschivanie* did not receive further theoretical development. It was displaced by the concept of *interiorization*, interpreted in the Piagetian spirit as a transition from the sensorimotor to the mental plane, according to A.N. Leontiev’s definition (whereas for Vygotsky, the starting point was the interpsychological plane — cooperation between adult and child — not individual sensorimotor activity). Sign mediation and “signification” (the creation and active use of artificial signals) were reduced to banal “verbalization” and pushed to the periphery of research interest. In A.V. Zaporozhets’ work, the concept of interiorization was extended even to perceptual processes not mediated by signs and performed — also by animals — strictly individually, without any cooperation.

If interiorization represents *the socialization of the natural*, then *vraschivanie* (ingrowing) is *the individualization of the social*. Vygotsky sharply emphasized this fundamental distinction: “Not the gradual socialization introduced into the child from outside, but the gradual individualization arising from the child’s inner sociality is the main path of child development” (Vygotsky, 1934, p. 282).

³ For further details, see: (Rubtsov, 2024).

The study of the psychological structure of the process of cooperation constitutes a key stage in the formation of the system of cultural-historical psychology (CHP). To this end, Vygotsky developed the instrumental method, whose experimental foundation was the famous method of double stimulation. Based on this method, fundamentally new data were obtained on the process of concept formation in children, the essence of which consists in “assigning meaning to a meaningless word.”

Key stages in the further development of the concept of interiorization within CHP include:

- P.Ya. Galperin’s elaboration of the method of forming mental actions with predetermined properties;
- the Zagorsk experiment by A.I. Meshcheryakov and E.V. Ilyenkov, which revealed how children acquire primary forms of cultural behavior and everyday (“spontaneous,” in Vygotsky’s terms) concepts in the course of jointly distributed material activity;
- and V.V. Rubtsov’s research on the formation of scientific concepts in conditions of collaborative educational activity.

The role of signs in learning cooperation was also studied within the framework of the socio-genetic method by A.G. Kritsky, A.V. Konokotin, and others. A.G. Kritsky (Kritsky, 1988) developed experimental situations of limited communication, where participants’ direct interaction during task-solving was blocked (e.g., by spatial separation or use of digital/computer-based environments). According to the findings, participants not restricted in their interactions (control group) were able to coordinate their actions more easily and rapidly and to exchange opinions; however, the semantic content of their interaction was limited. As a result, children had difficulty adapting when the material conditions of the task changed. Without distinguishing signs as tools for organizing and coordinating interaction, they remained within the level of “playful” cooperation and failed to identify the generalizable properties of the model they were working with.

In contrast, in groups where difficulty was introduced, participants developed a need to formulate a shared method of action and to find tools for coordinating their interaction. The development of such signs marked a shift from a playful to a learning-oriented focus. This was reflected in a move away from random trials aimed at identifying specific properties of the material situation, toward trials oriented at identifying ways of coordinating interaction and organizing joint action — and through that, modeling a shared method of action.

A.V. Konokotin also developed experimental situations with “uncertain” conditions (e.g., unscaled balancing apparatus), in which participants were required to independently create tools for solving the task. These tools, in turn, defined and structured their mode of interaction throughout the problem-solving process (Konokotin, 2023, p. 213).

The results confirmed that creating conditions in which participants are confronted with the need to construct sign-based means for productive interaction and task-solving enables them to shift from actions determined by immediate, situational, materially grounded conditions to the plane of mental, “ideal” actions. In the unfolding process of “signification” and “re-signification” of the object of action, the transformation of objective reality relied on participants’ representations of the essential properties of the object. This enabled them to jointly externalize their individual conceptions of the object’s characteristics, make these explicit and open to analysis, coordinate and reconcile them — and, ultimately, to collaboratively search for a solution to the task.

At the same time, the topic of *vrashchivanie* of *meanings* into the child’s psyche — through the formation of senses — and Vygotsky’s initial research into the semantic structure of consciousness unfortunately remain underdeveloped to this day. As he wrote: “Meaning enters into the instrumental operation as a ‘third link,’ mediating the relation between sign and object. Meaning, psychologically speaking, is the internal structure of the sign operation. The sign mediates through meaning. We used to take the sign in the context of behavior; now we must consider it in the context of consciousness” (Vygotsky, 2017, p. 306). In this view, meaning constitutes *the unit of verbal thought*. Vygotsky called for us to “uncover systemic organization in psychology through the analysis of meaning” (Vygotsky, 2017, p. 355). He began this work in his final book, *Thinking and Speech*.

4. The zone of proximal development

The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) emerged in cultural-historical psychology (CHP) later than many others, but it gained widespread recognition both in Russia and internationally. It is conceptually linked to *vrashchivanie* through Vygotsky’s well-known “garden metaphor.” The zone of proximal development, according to Vygotsky, contains “functions not yet matured,” whose development requires the support of an adult — especially a teacher. Only a foolish gardener judges the orchard by the fruits that have already ripened, Vygotsky said. Proper education differs from training in that it leads development, guiding it forward by orienting not only to what is already present and mature, but above all to what is emerging and will soon take the lead in the structure of consciousness.

The ZPD serves as a kind of unifying framework for the theory of CHP, linking together its “core” concepts: cooperation, sign mediation, *vrashchivanie* (ingrowing), consciousness, and others. It explains the central developmental mechanism in L.S. Vygotsky’s theory: how the social becomes individual, how the inter turns into the intra — that is, what later came to be known as

the general genetic law. The concept of the ZPD connects three major dimensions of human life: education, development, and psychological health (Zaretsky, Kholmogorova, 2020).

The enormous heuristic potential of the ZPD concept began to be recognized by researchers and practitioners many years after L.S. Vygotsky's death. This led not only to its rapid dissemination across various branches of psychology but also to ongoing debates about its interpretation. Vygotsky did not manage to fully unify the various ideas he expressed in different contexts, which is one reason for the ambiguity and diversity of contemporary readings of his theory of the ZPD.

Scholars of Vygotsky and his intellectual legacy recognized the ZPD's explanatory potential and sought to build developmental theory on its foundation. However, they did not always pay attention to its constructive potential — that is, its capacity to inform the design of developmental conditions, to guide the developmental process, and to solve concrete developmental challenges in practice (a vision of psychology as practical *theory* that Vygotsky himself strongly advocated).

International followers of Vygotsky, in promoting his ideas, often relied on a simplified definition of the ZPD from a 1935 pamphlet written for teachers. There, the ZPD is defined as the distance “between the level of actual development, as determined by independent problem-solving, and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers...” (Vygotsky, 1935, p. 42).

Below are key theses about the ZPD as they relate to cooperation and *vrashchivanie*:

- In the ZPD, the child jointly performs actions *with another person* (an adult or more capable peer) that they cannot yet perform alone.
- The experience the child acquires by acting jointly within the ZPD can become their own, thereby enabling “steps in development”; it is through this process that the *ingrowing* (*vrashchivanie*) of behavioral strategies and higher psychological functions occurs.
- The ZPD encompasses those actions that the child can carry out *consciously* in collaboration with an adult — what is unavailable to the child's consciousness cannot yet be appropriated⁴.
- In the ZPD, the child acts in *cooperation* with the adult; from this follows the idea of the child's agentive position in joint activity as a necessary condition for development.
- Teaching leads development, and a single step in instruction can mean a hundred steps in development.

An attempt to newly synthesize these theses led V.K. Zaretsky to develop the multi-vector model of the

ZPD (Zaretsky, 2007). This model conceptualizes child development in cooperation with the adult as movement along the vector of educational activity, which is accompanied by “steps in development” along multiple possible vectors — all of which, in one way or another, are connected to the child's engagement in learning.

5. Affect and *perezhivanie*

Shortly before his death, L.S. Vygotsky stated that “the true dynamic unit of consciousness, i.e., the full unit from which consciousness is built, is *perezhivanie*” (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 383).

This statement marks yet another (and ultimately final) radical shift in the development of the entire system of cultural-historical psychology (CHP). If *perezhivanie* is the “cell” of consciousness, which has a systemic structure, then consciousness is nothing other than *a system of perezhivaniya*. This means that every single form, function, and phenomenon of consciousness must be explained through the concept of *perezhivanie*, must relate to this dynamic — i.e., constantly changing, emerging and vanishing — unit, and must in some way be anchored in *perezhivanie* (just as in the capitalist system all processes are ultimately anchored in the commodity — real or ideal, i.e., money).

Vygotsky did not manage to complete this task, and therefore did not finish building the new theory of consciousness he envisioned. Since then, this task has rarely been taken up again, and the very concept of *perezhivanie* has long remained at the periphery of cultural-historical theory. Nevertheless, Vygotsky succeeded in analyzing the affective-semantic nature of *perezhivanie*, and in doing so, gave us the key to understanding the newly emerging system as a whole.

An openly available definition, overlooked by many, reads:

“*Perezhivanie* must be understood as the internal relation of the child, as a person, to a certain moment of reality” (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 382).

The emphasis here must be placed on the word internal, since, in addition to this internal relation (*perezhivanie*), the child is also connected to reality through an external relation — namely, *activity*. “The child's relation to the environment and the environment's relation to the child are given through the *perezhivanie* and the activity of the child himself,” Vygotsky clarified (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 383). *Perezhivanie* and activity, these two fundamental relations between the human personality (not only the child) and the external world, constitute the internal and external — or in Vygotsky's own terms, the phenomenal and the objective — dimensions of a person's life activity.

⁴ This leads to the notion of the boundaries of the ZPD. The importance of recognizing these boundaries is emphasized, for example, by W. Stiles, who notes that the primary error of the psychotherapist is “working outside the zone of proximal development” (Stiles, Gabalda, Ribeiro, 2016).

According to his notebooks, by the end of his life Vygotsky envisioned CHP as a three-story building:

The ground floor is instrumental psychology, which studies the “direct movement from life to consciousness.” This work was carried forward by A.N. Leontiev and the Kharkov school.

The second floor is the investigation of the world of consciousness, populated by *perezhivaniya*, meanings, and senses. This is the domain of *Thinking and Speech*.

The third and uppermost floor is “acmeist” psychology, or the study of how consciousness transforms and illuminates life.

“Of course, the cell depends in its development on the organism. Meaning depends on consciousness, and consciousness on life. But meaning changes consciousness, and consciousness changes life. *The reverse movement — from consciousness to life — is the key*. Spinoza... The direct movement (from life to consciousness) is only important insofar as it enables us to understand the *reverse movement — from consciousness to life* (consciousness transforms life), the dependence of life on consciousness” (Vygotsky, 2017, pp. 413–414).

In ontogenetic development, this shuttle movement corresponds to the “zigzag of free, meaningful action”: the shift from concrete action to conceptual thought, and back — from thought to action, now conscious and deliberate. The road from consciousness to life, and from thought to action, winds through the mountain ranges of *affect*.

Affect is the psychological form of expression of an organic need — a natural steering mechanism of activity in all living beings: desire, joy, anger, fear, and so on. Affect constitutes the “cell,” or “unit,” of the psyche as such⁵. Hence: “To study the order and interrelation of affects is the principal task of scientific psychology” (Vygotsky, 1936, p. 211).

This, in broad strokes, is the coordinate system within which the “late” Vygotsky built his theory of consciousness in general, and the concept of *perezhivanie* in particular. Drawing on Spinoza’s definition of affect as “a state of the body that increases or decreases its potency to act (*agendi potentia*),”⁶ Vygotsky began to formulate his own theory of affect as: “a holistic psychophysiological reaction that includes both *perezhivanie* and a certain kind of behavior, and represents a unity of the phenomenal and objective dimensions” (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 214).

Thus, according to Vygotsky, *perezhivanie* represents nothing other than *the phenomenal aspect of affect*. One

cannot understand what *perezhivanie* is without referring to the concept of affect — just as one cannot understand what price is without knowing the concept of value. This is clearly demonstrated by the recent “Symposium on *Perezhivanie*.”⁷

In the best works available today on the concept of *perezhivanie*, research is generally carried out on the first or, less frequently, the second “floor” of CHP. *Perezhivanie* is related to the general genetic law of cultural development and the concept of the social situation of development (Veresov, 2016; Fler, González, Veresov, 2017; Veresov, Fler, 2016), and a dual “emotional-cognitive refracting of the environment in *perezhivanie*” is acknowledged (Meshcheryakov, 2008 p. 107). At the same time, nearly all discussion has neglected the domain of “acmeist psychology”: the mastery of one’s own *perezhivaniya* through awareness and reflection; their regulation in childhood or theatrical play; the creation of artificial, cultural emotions; the subordination of affects to concepts; the establishment of a rational order and structure among affects.

Vygotsky saw *perezhivanie* as *a conscious affect*, or affect that has become a phenomenon of human consciousness. From its objective side, this same affect appears as a form of activity or behavior⁸. *Perezhivanie* and action are, in essence, one and the same — expressed in two different ways.

The development of the child’s psyche may be understood as the growth of conscious awareness (*prise de conscience*, in the terms of Clapar de and Piaget) in the sphere of inner emotional experience. Vygotsky, following Busemann, defines reflection as “the redirection of *perezhivanie* from the external world toward the self,” and so forth.

After Vygotsky’s death, the concept of *perezhivanie* as the “affective relation of the child to the environment” was developed by L.I. Bozhovich. However, she adopted a one-sided, strictly phenomenal definition of affect — as “a prolonged, deep emotional experience.” As a result, affect became a type of *perezhivanie*, and this reductionist interpretation was attributed to Vygotsky, despite the fact that she simply ignored his actual definitions with their clear references to Spinoza.

Bozhovich then criticized Vygotsky’s own concept of *perezhivanie* on the grounds that he linked it to meaning, endowed *perezhivaniya* with meanings, and explained them through concepts. In doing so, she argued, Vygotsky reduced psychological analysis to “purely subjective

⁵ “Affect is the alpha and omega, the beginning and end, the prologue and epilogue of all psychic development” (Vygotsky, 1984 p. 297).

⁶ Vygotsky cited and extensively commented on Spinoza’s activity-based (or “dynamogenic,” as he put it) definition of affect, finding experimental confirmation of it in the works of W. Cannon and C. Sherrington, K. Lewin, and M. Prince. Emotion is not an epiphenomenon; it must do something — “it must activate us.”

⁷ In 2016, the journal *Mind, Culture, and Activity* dedicated a special issue (vol. 23, no. 4) to this topic: “Symposium on *Perezhivanie*.” Notably, among a dozen articles, not a single one refers to the “Theory of Emotions.”

⁸ The terms “activity” and “behavior” often merge in Vygotsky’s writings. Expressions like “type of behavior” and “form of activity” are used interchangeably, separated by commas, and behavior is defined as “all activity.” At times, however, he distinguishes between them — for example, when referring to “behavior in the process of activity.”

tive processes,” isolating *perezhivaniya* from “real-life relations” (Bozhovich, 1968, pp. 153–157).

The true continuation of the “acmeist psychology” project was taken up — thanks to B.V. Zeigarnik and her school — in the field of *pathopsychology* (Zeigarnik, Kholmogorova, Mazur, 1989). Special attention deserves the work of A.Sh. Tkhostov and colleagues, compiled in the monograph *Cultural-Historical Pathopsychology* (Tkhostov, 2020). Their studies of the development of voluntary emotional regulation (through sign-symbolic operations) effectively fulfill Vygotsky’s scientific testament, and in some respects even go beyond it — especially in their engagement with the concept of post-voluntariness.

An excellent contribution to the second floor of the system is offered by E.Yu. Zavershneva, who proposes her own interpretation of Vygotsky’s hypothesis about the cause of neuroses: namely, the inability to translate an affective complex into *perezhivanie* (Zavershneva, 2017). In another article, she presents valuable insights into the semantic nature of (Zavershneva, 2015).

An original approach to the problem of *perezhivanie*, based on Vygotsky’s ideas, was developed by F.E. (Vasiluk, 1984). His ideas merit a separate discussion.

Vygotsky’s Copernican revolution (in place of a conclusion)

There are two types of scientific systems: some depict a subject under the form of the observer, others — under the form of eternity. The first type is exemplified by Ptolemy’s geocentric model; the second — by Copernicus’s system (or the solar system as it truly is). Systems of the first type always contain “their own” truth — a partial or local truth; systems of the second type are the truth itself — however incomplete or inexact it may still

be⁹. They do not offer a “private” or “relative” truth, but a *universal* scientific system.

Cultural-Historical Psychology did not acquire the character of a universal system immediately. “We introduced the systemic point of view too late... *Now* I understand all of this more deeply,” wrote Vygotsky “contra A.N.” (Leontiev) in 1932 (Vygotsky, 2017, p. 321). Two years earlier, in his lecture “On Psychological Systems” (October 1930), Vygotsky acknowledged that in the study of various psychological functions, their interrelation in the processes of development and disintegration of higher psychological functions had been overlooked. As a result, “we lost sight of the concept of personality” as a system of tertiary connections — the kinds of connections that form among psychological functions in adolescence through reflection and self-awareness. It was precisely this turn toward understanding personality as a psychological system that gave CHP its truly systemic character. The beginnings of this breakthrough can already be seen in the 1929 manuscript “The Concrete Psychology of Personality” (Vygotsky, 1986).

Vygotsky, like Copernicus, managed to account for *the movement of the observer* — that is, cultural-historical development of human personality itself. The principle of historicity allowed Vygotsky to conceptualize the human psyche *sub specie aeternitatis* — not from the narrow, historically bounded viewpoint of the “observer” (from which emerges the entirety of today’s descriptive and explanatory psychology).

This constitutes the revolution that Vygotsky accomplished in global psychology.

Thanks to the recent “archival revolution,” we are now able to discern the outlines of the system he envisioned but did not live to complete. The time has come to align the current trajectory of CHP with these contours — to determine where we are headed next.

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⁹ Just as Copernicus mistakenly believed that planets move in circular orbits at constant speed, and astronomical calculations in such a system naturally produced significant error.

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