

# Translating *perezhivanie* into English\*

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An outline is suggested for how the word *perezhivanie* can be appropriated from Russian Psychology in general and Vygotskian psychology in particular, as a meaningful word in English-language Psychology, drawing on cognate concepts from Freud, Winnicott, Dewey, Kübler-Ross, Stanislavskii, et al. It is suggested that through its connection with the working out of a person's life-projects, *perezhivanie* plays a key role in connecting Psychology with Social Theory.

## Introduction

*Perezhivanie* is a complex concept and there is no translation of the word into English which captures even the core content of the concept, let alone the range of connotations entailed in the Russian. Hitherto, only one English translation of Vygotsky's works contains any indication at all of the meaning of the word. *The Problem of the Environment* (1934), is the text of a lecture delivered in 1934, the second in a series, the first being *The Problem of Heredity*. The point of the article was to set out a foundation for analyzing the role of a child's social environment in the formation of their personality, as opposed to the part played by their genetic inheritance.

Although *perezhivanie* also figures in other works, such as *The Psychology of Art*, the English translations make Vygotsky's use of *perezhivanie* invisible. Vygotsky was not inventing a new concept however. The concept of *perezhivanie* has a firm place in Russian literature and culture generally, and it was in general only necessary for Vygotsky to mention the word '*perezhivanie*' for Russian-speakers to understand the concept being referred to. Its place in a scientific theory of psychology is another matter, of course, and this is by no means easily grasped whatever your native tongue, as the concept is inevitably modified by its incorporation into a scientific theory.

## No mystery

*Perezhivanie* is not a complete mystery to English-speakers however. To the extent that the phenomena are manifest within the British and American cultures, they are known to English speakers, and the psychological implications have been examined by English and German-speaking psychologists with whom English speakers will be familiar. The recognition of points of commonality between the English-speaking and Russian traditions have been obscured by the difficulties encountered, not just by English speakers in reading Russian, but also by Russians trying to explain the concept in English, and the difficulty in grasping the Marxist / Hegelian concept of 'unity'.

The first thing to know about *perezhivanie* is that it is a *countable* noun (like 'tool' or 'litre') not a mass noun (like equipment or water). So when we use *perezhivanie* as a word in the English language it must carry an article (i.e., 'the' or 'a') or be used in the plural – *perezhivaniya*, or with an appropriate pronoun like 'every'.

The countable/mass distinction is available in all languages, but it is indicated in different ways. In English it is the use or absence of articles, but Russian does not use

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articles, and it is difficult for speakers of languages, such as Russian or Punjabi, which do not have articles to figure out how to use them when speaking English. So it is quite common for a Russian speaker to explain *perezhivanie* by saying something like: “*Perezhivanie* is unit of personality.” The English-speaking listener knows that ‘unit’ is a countable noun, and if they were to repeat this expression they probably would say: “*Perezhivanie* is a unit of the personality.” But being unfamiliar with Russian, they do not realize that *perezhivanie* is a countable noun; yet only countable nouns can be units of anything! So an English speaker who says “*Perezhivanie* is a unit of personality,” but goes on to discuss *perezhivaniya* without ever using the plural or an article, is showing that they do not understand the meaning of the word ‘unit’. For example: “Tool is unit of equipment” is poor English, but “Equipment is a unit of property” is more than bad English; it is an oxymoron. Even though very few native English-speakers are aware of the countable/mass distinction, we all use it without conscious awareness. ‘Tool’ and ‘litre’ are countable so we say something like: “Tools are units of equipment,” and “The unit of water is a litre,” but “Equipment is an element of property,” not a unit.

We have the same situation with ‘activity’. ‘Activity’ (without the article) is a mass noun, but we use the same word as a countable noun for the units of activity. That is: “Activity is made up of many activities.” But for a Russian speaker: “Activity is unit of activity,” and alas English speakers have often been content to emulate this oxymoronic English.

So it has come to pass that English speakers have both accepted ‘*perezhivanie*’ as a mass noun (never having heard anyone use it in the plural or with an article), and deprived the word ‘unit’ of its meaning. This suggests that when people read Vygotsky on ‘unit of analysis’ they interpret ‘unit’ to be something other than what they know it to mean, perhaps just the ‘subject matter’. Consequently, the claim that “*Perezhivaniya* are units of the personality” is completely mystified. Since *perezhivanie* is a scientific concept by virtue of its inclusion in a scientific theory, this mistake obscures Vygotsky’s scientific concept of *perezhivanie*.

*Perezhivaniya* have a beginning a middle and an end; they are events, episodes, activities, happenings or experiences in which people are active participants.

The typical English translation of ‘*perezhivanie*’ is ‘experience’ sometimes carrying the qualifiers: ‘emotional experience’ or ‘lived experience’, or the neolog ‘experiencing’. The word ‘experience’, whether or not qualified as ‘emotional’ or ‘lived’, when used without an article, is a mass noun. ‘Experience’ is that passive background of activity which is the fundamental concept of *Empiricism* – the historically dominant current in Anglo-American analytical science, or an accumulated mass of knowledge and skills. When *perezhivanie* is interpreted as ‘experience’ and taken to be the fundamental factor in the formation of personality and knowledge for Vygotsky, then this is in effect to assimilate Vygotsky’s Marxist Psychology into Anglo-American Empiricism. On the contrary, Vygotsky takes personality and knowledge to be something *actively constructed* by the subject.

In Russian, there is a word for ‘experience’ in the sense it is used in Empiricism. When used as a countable noun, *opit* means an experiment. Usually, *opit* is a mass noun translated as ‘experience’, as in the opening words of Kant's (1787) *Critique of Pure Reason*: “There can be no doubt that all our knowledge begins with experience” – and the sense in which ‘experience’ is used, for example, when an employer asks for your

‘work experience’. That word is *opit*. *Perezhivanie* also means ‘experience’ but it is different from *opit* and has quite different connotations.

### An Experience

The idea of ‘an experience’ was outlined by John Dewey in his article “Having an Experience” (1939) in perfectly clear English prose which any English-speaker could understand.

Dewey explained the “double-barreled” nature of the concept of ‘an experience’ in that “it includes *what* men do and suffer, *what* they strive for, love, believe and endure, and *how* men act and are acted upon, the ways in which they do and suffer, desire and enjoy, see, believe, imagine.” (1929, p. 256). Experiences are countable: “each with its own plot, its own inception and movement toward its close, each having its own particular rhythmic movement” (1939, p. 555). He explained that ‘an experience’ was an ‘original unity’, not a combination: “The existence of this unity is constituted by a single *quality* that pervades the entire experience in spite of the variation of its constituent parts. This unity is neither emotional, practical, nor intellectual, for these terms name distinctions that reflection can make within it.” (1939, p. 556) And he understood its origin in the resolution of problems or crises: “The unsettled or indeterminate situation might have been called a *problematic* situation. ... Without a problem, there is blind groping in the dark.” (1938, p. 229) All these are facets of *perezhivaniya*.

Dewey’s concept of ‘an experience’ goes only halfway to covering the concept Russians have of *perezhivanie*, but it is the best approximation we have in *a single word*, within the English language and Anglo-American culture.

Freud also was familiar with *perezhivanie* and his psychoanalysis aimed to assist patients in “remembering, repeating and working-through” past experiences, supposedly concerned with childhood sexuality. The British child psychoanalyst, Donald Winnicott’s (1971) work on weaning, that is, the successful parting of mother and child, was also concerned with *perezhivanie*. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross whose work on dying is well-known in the Anglosphere was also dealing with how *perezhivaniya* play out in time.

### Etymology

A look at the etymology of *perezhivanie* gives us a glimpse of why ‘an experience’ fails to capture the concept of *perezhivanie* (See Robbins 2007).

*Perezhivanie* comes from the verb *perezhivat*. *Zhivat* means ‘to live’ and *pere* means carrying something over something, letting something pass beneath and overleaping it, something like cutting out a piece of space, time or feeling. So *perezhivat* means to be able to sur-vive after some disaster, i.e., to ‘over-live’ something. To illustrate the force of *pere*: *terpet* means to endure some pain, so *pereterpet* means to live until a time when no pain is left, to outlive the pain; *pereprignut* means to overcome some obstacle, to jump or fly over it.

In the same way, *perezhivat* means that you have passed as if above something that had made you feel pain; and in the base of each “again living” lies a pain and you know that. There, inside of a recollection that we call an “again living” – lives your pain, not letting you forget what has happened, and you keep living through it over and over again, working-through it, repeating it until you have passed through it, and have survived.

Most of the above words are quoted from an email message from Dot Robbins (2007), who goes on to remark that *perezhivanie* “really captures the ‘Russian soul’.”

But it is also important that there can be good as well as painful *perezhivaniya* (Kotik-Friedgut 2007), that *perezhivanie* is not only surviving a life-changing disaster, but also consolidating on a dramatic leap forward in your life, a daring move you made, a risk that paid off and opened a new phase of your life.

Fully developed *perezhivaniya* are tied up with the fate of one’s life-projects and are life-changing episodes in your life, and they begin in a moment of especial clarity.

### Catharsis

Having had an experience and surviving it is no guarantee that there will be any impact on your psychology, or any personal development made from it. The experience has to be *processed* in some way. *Perezhivaniya* differ from experiences in that a *perezhivanie* *includes* the ‘processing’ of an experience, working over and assimilating it into your personality. As such, a *perezhivanie* may continue for years after a catastrophic experience, such as the death of a loved one. *Perezhivaniya* may also constitute experiences which extend over many years, such as a period in exile or a childhood with an alcoholic parent, provided only that the experience and the working over has a certain unifying quality, that it comprises a coherent and memorable episode in your life.

So it is evident why we cannot find a single word in the English language to translate *perezhivanie*: a *perezhivanie* is *both* an experience (in the sense in which Dewey explained) *and* the ‘working over’ of it.

This process of working over is known as ‘catharsis’. In its original meaning in ancient Greece, catharsis was the experience of an audience who, when watching a tragedy at the theatre externalized their emotions by empathizing with the performers who were acting it out for them. This was deemed to have a healthy effect, what might be called ‘purging’ oneself of the emotion. Later, the early medical profession used ‘catharsis’ to refer to the use of a purgative which would induce catharsis, namely vomiting out the material causing illness. Freud (1914) gave catharsis a psychoanalytic meaning, referring to a patient remembering and repeating an emotional experience through a therapist (like the actor on the ancient Greek stage), and working through the experience, overcoming and ‘surviving’ (to use the Russian idea), ‘transcending’ it or ‘sublating’ it to use the Hegelian term. So this process of working through is well-known to English speakers, but we do not have a single word which encompasses *both* the traumatic experience *and* the catharsis.

So we should not attempt to translate *perezhivanie* – *perezhivanie* is a uniquely Russian concept, though one which is accessible to English speakers provided that it is explained. We need to assimilate *perezhivanie* as a word in the English language, using it in our research and writing and thereby building up a concept of *perezhivanie* within English language scientific literature – not identical with the word as it is within *Russian* culture and literature, but *our* concept of *perezhivanie* – based on the understanding that *perezhivanie* means the *whole process* of a potentially life-changing experience *inclusive of* the working over of that experience in a ‘catharsis’.

As an activity which is drawn out in time, a *perezhivanie* typically passes through stages. In a chapter on grief in his *Psychology of Experiencing* (1984, pp. 221-234), Fedor Vasilyuk has outlined a series of stages of *perezhivanie*: (1) Shock and

stupefaction, fury; (2) searching; (3) Despair and suffering; (3) Residual shocks and reorganization; (5) Completion. In each of these phases, a different leading activity is needed to achieve the development and transformation into a new situation.

Elisabeth Kübler-Ross (1969) studied the stages through which a person passes when undergoing an uncontrollable change in their life circumstances, particularly the death of a loved one: (1) denial, (2) anger, (3) bargaining, (4) depression and (5) acceptance. Kübler-Ross's work is essentially a study of one particular type of *perezhivanie*: grieving. For Kübler-Ross, grieving is not simply an emotion, but an activity one carries out, together with others, in response to a crisis coming from the world outside your control – working through the meaning of this loss and reorienting your life projects now without the active presence of the loved one. Some contemporary psychologists extend Kübler-Ross's work to understand other life-changing experiences, though in my view often unsuccessfully.

Vasilyuk uses the word '*perezhivanie*' specifically to mean the process of *working over*. In his opinion, to successfully complete *perezhivanie* requires the aid of another person, be that a therapist, a parent or an actor. Freud also believed that everyone needed a psychoanalyst. Whether Freud and Vasilyuk are right or not, it seems that the aid of another person who is capable of objectifying and reflecting back the feelings of the person going through a *perezhivanie*, guiding them and making use of the resources of the culture to assist them in finding an accommodation with their new situation, is normally needed.

## Personality

What does this expansive concept of *perezhivanie* mean for the development of the personality, which is the subject Vygotsky is addressing in “The Problem of the Environment”? How does it help a person answer the question: who am I? If you were to write a biography of a person, wouldn't you have to connect together the *perezhivaniya* of their life and demonstrate to the reader who the person was and how they came to be that person – the experiences they had and how they overcame them. And as a writer you would be unlikely to view the series of life-crises, the experiencing and overcoming of which made the person who they were, to be simply events that *happened to* the person. As John Dewey notes, these experiences arise only in the course of a person trying to resolve some problem. *Perezhivaniya* are tied up with one's orientation or commitment to various life-projects, and it is in the fate of these projects that psychological challenges arise. As Vasilyuk outlines, they could be value conflicts (like family/work commitments, or the betrayal of your values by respected leaders), or real clashes between valued projects (like when your parents go through an acrimonious divorce), blockages (like being disgraced in your career or losing your job), or simply the inability to formulate a life project.

These considerations could be summed up by saying that *perezhivaniya* are units of the personality or units of the formation of the personality, which is the same thing. The personality is the product of life's *perezhivaniya*.

A. N. Leontyev remarked that *perezhivaniya* are “manifested as internal signals, by means of which are realized the personal sense of an event” and S. L. Rubenstein claimed: “*Perezhivaniya* become for the person that which proves to be personally significant for them.” *Perezhivaniya* are the units or chapters of one's autobiography, the episodes which stand out in the memory from the background of one's life, and

having been worked over by you and told and retold (to yourself or others), and ‘coded’ in language and images, become meaningful. Together *perezhivaniya* form the basis of who you are: not just what *happened* to you, but what you *did*, what you made of your life, in the context of the life-projects to which you were committed and which made the event life-changing and emotion-charged, how you worked over them and gave them meaning.

This is the sense in which Vygotsky said that *perezhivaniya* are units of a consciousness or of the personality as a whole.

### Unity

As mentioned above, misunderstanding may arise not from translation, but from unfamiliarity with Marxist and Hegelian ideas, and in particular, the concept of *unity*. The issue of the meaning of unity arises in two aspects of the concept of *perezhivanie*.

The first is in the part of *The Problem of the Environment* where Vygotsky says (in a passage which is italicized):

So, in a *perezhivanie* we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in the *perezhivanie*. (1934, p. 342)

By “unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics,” Vygotsky obviously meant the *relation*, not the personality *plus* the situation. In Set Theoretical terms, the unity is the intersection not the union, those aspects or features which are both personal *and* environmental. For example, depending on the place of a job in a person’s life project, the loss of a job has a different significance. If a young backpacker loses their job, it is not the same as it is for someone’s whose job is their career. Vygotsky means that the *perezhivanie* is both subjective and objective; it is a very specific correlation between the development of the personality and affairs of the wider world which could be in themselves irrelevant to the subject’s psychology and unknown to them. The problem could be a tyrannical boss or changes in technology making a skill redundant, each of which has different implications. The oldest son in Vygotsky’s well-known case study, overcomes the problem of an alcoholic mother by *transforming the objective situation* by changing himself, making himself into the ‘senior man’ of the house.

Vygotsky saw *perezhivaniya* as *units* of the relation between the personality and the environment which arise in an analysis of the formation of the personality through one’s own activity as opposed to what one inherits in the genes.

There is a second respect in which *perezhivaniya* are said to be a unity; many writers note that *perezhivaniya* are “a unity of affect and intellect.” As Dewey explained above, a person’s activity, that is, their experiences, are each a *whole*, an *original* unity. *Perezhivanie* is not a *combination* of intellect and affect. On the contrary, it is only by reflection that we, as observers, can *abstract from* experiences the various psychological functions, for the purpose of our analysis. We need not stop at intellect and affect; we could also list attention, will, memory, and any other psychological function we care to name. In the first place (except perhaps in infancy when some psychological functions still subsist in a specific biological substrate), there is just the activity of the person as whole, not just emotion and intellect, but a whole person. Experiences are a *whole*. From this, we can abstract the separate functions.

For example, dough is made by adding water and flour, but dough is not a *unity* of dough and water. Milk is a unity of curds and whey, however, because curds and whey exist only as products extracted from milk, which comes whole from the cow.

So when we say that *perezhivaniya* are a “unity” of emotion and intellect and ..., we mean that *perezhivaniya* are wholes from which various psychological functions, themselves products of that whole, can be abstracted. So a person’s intellect develops, along with the development of their emotions and their will, as aspects of their whole personality, through the *perezhivaniya* of their life.

### Lived Experiences

‘Lived experience’ differs from ‘experience’ in that rather than insisting on the correlation between situational features and personal features, it gives priority to the meaning or interpretation of the subject themselves. The concept of ‘lived experience’ has gained prominence in resolving problems which have arisen in the professions of Social Work and Counseling, emphasizing as the focus the *perception of the subject*, irrespective of what may have happened objectively, that is to say, in the eyes of the rest of the world. So for example for a person who thought they were doing their job well and was devastated when they were sacked, ‘lived experience’ has a strong sense of how it feels *to that person*, what the sacking meant for them; that is what the therapist has to deal with. But this is going from one extreme – in which the sacking is taken simply as an objective event, whatever its significance for the person’s identity and self-esteem – to the other, subjectivist position, as a problem for a therapist, rather than a union delegate or employment agency. Perhaps the subject really was inadequate in the role and recovery entails acceptance of that fact, or perhaps on the contrary, the boss is a tyrant who needs to be brought before a court for his actions? Or perhaps the subject needs to reskill for a profession in a service industry? The oldest boy did not seek a therapist, he transformed his situation. *Perezhivaniya* are *both* objective *and* subjective, and success entails changing the social situation, either transforming the object, transforming the subject or both.

*Perezhivanie* is probably the most important concept in general psychology because it is a unit of development of the person *as a whole*, and all the other aspects of their personality must be grasped as arising from these *perezhivaniya* which have contributed to the self-formation of the person. But also, it is precisely through *perezhivaniya* that the subject matter of psychology joins up with the great societal forces active in the world beyond the immediate circle of the person’s social situation. This world is made and remade through people’s life projects, the projects to which people commit themselves and whose fate is to fashion their personality. So *perezhivanie* is a ‘hinge’ joining the social and psychological sciences.

### Units

The idea of a unit of analysis is central to Vygotsky’s contribution to science, and yet its only elaboration is in Chapter One of *Thinking and Speech*. However, the roots of *perezhivanie* as a unit of analysis may be found in Vygotsky’s early interest in the theatre and in particular in the ideas of Constantin Stanislavskii (1936). Stanislavskii says that every performance must be broken down into units, each of which must have its own unique emotional content and motivation within the artistic objectives of the plot. Stanislavskii’s elaboration of these ‘units’ remind us of the ‘living-through’ and

‘repeating’ which we associate with *perezhivanie*. The actor must draw on their own life experiences to be able to reproduce the outward forms of *perezhivaniya* on stage and allow the audience to share them. Stanislavskii insists that each unit has to make sense in terms of the dramatic objective of the play as a whole. This surely suggests the idea of *perezhivaniya* as units of analysis of a really lived life.

Each *perezhivaniya* can be understood in itself, in the light of the objective circumstances contributing to the situation, and the relevant life project of the person as they were in the wake of previous *perezhivaniya*. They are units of analysis, the understanding of which provides the key to how specific changes in their personality and social position were achieved, and constitute a person’s *Bildungsroman* – to use Goethe’s term – the story of their development as a person.

This brings us to the fact that not only the person, but their capacity for *perezhivanie* also develops through ontogenesis.

### Development

In *The Problem of the Environment*, Vygotsky illustrates the idea of *perezhivanie* by the case of three siblings coping or not with their single mother who is a drunk. The infant is indifferent to this situation, being too young to know; the middle child is traumatised; and the oldest child, a teenage boy, understands that he must become ‘the senior man’ in the family, makes an accelerated development and takes responsibility for looking after his siblings *and* his mother. That is, it is only the adolescent who is able to master the *perezhivanie*, and even in his case, without outside assistance, his own development may be damaged by his loss of childhood. In this way, Vygotsky showed how *not just* the social environment, but the significance of features of the environment *for the subject* and the subject’s capacity to process them, make up the essential units of analysis for understanding the development of the child.

Given that in the Anglosphere Vygotsky is mostly read by educators and child development people, not psychotherapists or anthropologists, is not surprising that *perezhivanie* has been taken up within the discipline of child development. In Russia, on the other hand, it is mainly thanks to the work of Fedor Vasilyuk in Psychotherapy that *perezhivanie* is widely used, and mainly in connection with adults. In fact, only adults can successfully complete the full range of psychological phenomena associated with *perezhivanie*. But as I. A. Meshcheryakova remarks (n.d.):

According to the theory of Vygotsky, *perezhivanie* can be approached as any other mental function, which in ontogenesis is developed from the involuntary and direct forms to the highest forms, which have status of actions or activities. This approach offers possibilities for distinguishing the different genetic forms of *perezhivanie*, and also for the search for the cultural-historical means of mastery of *perezhivaniya*.

Ferholt, Nilsson and their colleagues have been able to observe *perezhivaniya* in very young children, a moment of calm in the midst of mayhem when the subject glimpses something new. Mike Cole has noted that in each case, the attention and intervention of experienced adult carers was necessary to achieve the ‘reflection’ required for the child to make this leap, confirming that it is instruction which leads development, and that culture and social interaction are always involved in the development of the higher mental functions, or as Vygotsky expressed it in the ‘general genetic law of cultural development’:



every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an intermental category, then within the child as a intramental category. (Vygotsky 1931)

A child does not have a life-project. Having a life-project is part of the very meaning of being an adult. Development during childhood is characterized by a series of 'leading activities' which are arranged for the child by responsible adults as appropriate to their degree of maturity in the given culture. It is in relation to their leading activity that *perezhivaniya* occur, not life-projects. For a child it is in the critical periods of transition between developmental stages within an appropriate social situation of development that *perezhivaniya* occur.

This leaves us, however, with an imposing research problem: how does *perezhivanie* develop in the course of ontogenetic development from childhood through adolescence to adulthood? How frequently the advice of respected adults figures in our development during our teenage years! And yet as adults, unless severe trauma is involved, we are usually able to 'process' experiences ourselves, or with the support of family, and we consult professionals only in the event of our failure to overcome a crisis.

So *perezhivaniya* figure in our development at all stages of our life, but it changes in form and develops like all the higher mental functions. *Perezhivanie* develops in line with and in connection with the leading activities in a person's life situation.

## Reflection

It seems to be a general rule that *perezhivanie* is an activity which cannot be successfully completed without the support of others, be that a parent who listens to the child's schoolyard story and tells them how to interpret the experience, the friends who enclose the bereaved person in loving support or the work colleagues who reorient their relations to a colleague who has made a breakthrough and give them the respect due to a more senior colleague, or the psychotherapist who talks it through with their patient, helping them to re-interpret a catastrophe and find meaning and/or solutions in an impossible situation.

Freud insisted on the importance of the therapist assisting the patient being able to confront their childhood traumas and repeat them as adults, reworking them and giving them new meaning as mature adults, fully cognizant of what was done to them.

Donald Winnicott was concerned with mothers and children who had become so dependent on one another that when the child finally detaches from physical reliance on the mother, either the mother becomes depressed and anxious or the child does, or both; or on the other hand, the mother-and-child actually fail to make that critical transition and remain codependent, or experience a range of pathologies. According to Winnicott, successful weaning is essential to future development of the child's personality, as well as that of the parent.

Like Kübler-Ross's study of dying, Winnicott's study of weaning is a special case of *perezhivanie*: difficulties arising in the completion of a life-project and one's relation to others entailed in the fate of life-projects. But in fact, these crises are manifested throughout life as one passes through critical phases in the working-out of one's life projects. These transitions are called *perezhivaniya*. Invariably, the resources for making these critical transitions are to be found in the culture, and often it is necessary to have the assistance of more experienced others to successfully navigate these

transitions and utilize the possibilities for semiotic mediation, leading to *mastery* of the transition.

The concept of *perezhivanie* allows us to understand experiences which are not so dramatic, and what has been said above applies to those relatively minor joys and embarrassments which ‘stick in our minds’, still evoke an emotional response and are connected with our motivation, without becoming life-changing traumas. As Vygotsky remarked: “I proceeded from the idea that the well-developed forms ... provide the key to the underdeveloped ones” (1928, p. 319).

### Critiques

There have been critiques of Vygotsky’s concept of *perezhivanie* by Soviet colleagues. Lydia Bozhovich (2009) claimed that *perezhivanie* is a unit of the social situation of development – “the child’s ‘affective relationship’ to the environment.” This could lead to confusion, because social situation of development is itself a product of analysis in the study of child development. Secondly, claiming: “[Vygotsky] felt that the nature of experience in the final analysis is determined by how children understand the circumstances affecting them, that is, by *how developed their ability to generalize is*,” she mixes up the *actual* relation between the child and their social environment with a *conception* of that relationship formed by the child. In the same article, Bozhovich makes the correct point that *perezhivanie* being a unit, does not mean that it is ‘indivisible’, and cannot be subject to analysis.

In an undated article entitled “Study of the environment in the works of L. S. Vygotsky” (2005), A. N. Leontyev quoted Vygotsky: “The situation will influence the child in different ways depending on how well the child understands its sense and meaning,” which he glosses as “*perezhivanie* itself is determined by understanding, that is, by consciousness. ... the effect of the environment depends on the child’s degree of comprehension of the environment.” Leontyev thus interprets Vygotsky as viewing *perezhivanie* as primarily an *intellectual* process, one of a subject *comprehending* their social situation. But this turns Vygotsky’s idea upside down: first of all the subject has a *perezhivanie*, and this determines their whole development and response to the situation, whether or not they comprehend it. In the case of the most developed *perezhivaniya*, an adult *will* gain an understanding of their experience, but this is only thanks to later analysis of the *perezhivanie*. But in the first place it is a *whole*.

### Conclusion

Once our attention is drawn to the meaning of *perezhivanie* and the idea that *perezhivaniya* are the units of our autobiography, so to speak, the series of crises through which we have constructed our life and personality, then two things follow.

Firstly, we should revisit the literature, philosophy and psychology available to us as English speakers where we can now recognize that these same issues are being dealt with. Vygotsky’s Psychology, with its view of the human being as the ongoing product of phylogenesis, cultural-historical development and ontogenesis, the method of analysis by units and the experimental-genetic methodology of his psychological research, the conception of the sign mediation of all human interactions – these resources can be mobilized for a critical re-appropriation of a wide range of contemporary psychological theory and practice.

Secondly, the problem of the development of *perezhivanie* in ontogenesis is posed for us, presently as an unsolved, indeed unasked question. And how important this question is for the problem of the development of our young people! What *are* the conditions for the successful completion of *perezhivaniya*; under what conditions is a person able to achieve ‘closure’, as they say nowadays? Does the concept of *perezhivanie* suggest how Vygotsky scholars could intervene in contemporary discussions about Post Traumatic Stress Disorder and problems such as domestic violence and youth suicide?

How much of the response to these questions can be found in the scientific literature of our Russian colleagues? How can their knowledge, accumulated over the 80 years since Vygotsky’s death, be made available for English-speakers?

### “The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape.”

In my initial contribution I characterized *perezhivanie* as an integral concept, despite the fact that at least two English words – “experience” and “catharsis” – were needed to encompass its meaning. However, reading the contributions to this volume one is led to the impression that at least three distinct concepts are indexed by the Russian word *perezhivanie*.

The first is the word as used in everyday Russian language and literature, which was imported into mainstream psychology, with a meaning such that (as Veresov and Fleer tell us), Vygotsky could say: “from a subjective perspective, every psychological process is a *perezhivanie*.” Mainstream therapists to this day regard *perezhivaniya*, in this sense, as the basic substance of their work, and Stanislavskii adopted this phenomenological concept of *perezhivaniya* as units for the work of an actor, although construing *perezhivanie* as an activity rather than as a moment of passive subjection.

Secondly, as Veresov outlines for us, in his last period of work, Vygotsky took *perezhivaniya* to be units of the development of the personality, in contradistinction to the influence of the child’s genetic inheritance. Here ‘*perezhivanie*’ indexes not just any psychological process, but only those dramatic experiences which are significant for the development of the personality. What is more, Vygotsky explicitly included in the concept of *perezhivanie* those aspects of the objective world which are the content of the *perezhivanie* rather than taking *perezhivanie* from a purely subjective, phenomenological perspective. It is this meaning of the word which has been most widely known to English speakers because of its use in *Problem of the Environment*.

Clarà points out that the concept of *perezhivanie* which is theorized by Fedor Vasilyuk (1988), is a “semiotic transformation of Vygotsky’s *perezhivanie*.” “[T]he fact that Vasilyuk and Vygotsky both use the term *perezhivanie* is ... not due to the fact that they were both naming the same phenomenon; however, it is not entirely fortuitous either, since they were naming two different but related phenomena” (p. 17 above). Vasilyuk himself contrasts the concept of *perezhivanie* which he uses with the first, the concept of *perezhivanie* known to mainstream psychology:

Let me repeat that the term “*perezhivanie*” is used here not in the sense most familiar in psychological literature — that of a direct, usually emotional form in which the content of his consciousness is given to the subject — but to denote a *special inner activity or inner work* by means of which an individual succeeds in withstanding various (usually painful) events and situations in life, succeeds in regaining the mental equilibrium which has been temporarily lost — succeeds, in short, in coping with a crisis. (1988, p. 15)

So Vasilyuk does share with Vygotsky and Stanislavskii the fundamental conception of *perezhivanie* even in its everyday and phenomenological senses, though as *activity* rather than as passive contemplation, in the sense in which this distinction was made by Fichte, Hegel and Marx.

Third is the meaning of *perezhivanie* known to Russian life and literature which I learnt from Robbins and Kotik-Friedgut, in which *perezhivaniya* are not just *any* experience, but *dramatic* experiences, and Veresov highlights this aspect of the concept of *perezhivaniya* in Vygotsky's later work. In Veresov's view (and I agree), for Vygotsky "drama was key for the process of development."

What are we to make of these different but *related* concepts?

The specific connotations, nuances and contexts with which the word '*perezhivanie*' is deployed by Vygotsky, Vasilyuk and others are important for understanding each of the psychological systems in which it figures. However, *perezhivanie* must be seen as a concept which *encompasses* the phenomenological, dramatic and cathartic phases of its development. *Perezhivanie* is not a sum of different psychological functions, but an integral form of activity from which various psychological functions are differentiated. But unless *perezhivanie* is understood as a mode of *activity*, simultaneously objective and subjective, the conception of *perezhivanie* is not just different, but deficient.

Clarà assures us that in *Problem of the Environment*, Vygotsky is not talking about the same thing as Vasilyuk is when talking about an adult patient at his psychotherapeutic practice. True. But it is *also* important to understand that they *are* talking about the same thing. It is not a question of an ambiguous word, but of a concrete concept of psychological development.

### A concept as a process and path of development

Before Hegel, concepts were understood to consist of the set of attributes which were necessary and sufficient for an object to be subsumed under the concept. On this basis the objects found within a field of study could be categorized by genus and type. Hegel gave us a completely different approach. For Hegel, all the concepts relevant to a domain of science are unfolded from a foundational concept (form of activity) and therefore stand in developmental relations to one another.

This is the method Marx exhibited in *Capital*.

In *Capital*, Marx resolved a number of riddles in political economy when, rather than providing a series of definitions and categories, he began his critique from the concept of commodity and from the concept of commodity, derived money, wages, labor-power and capital all as forms of *commodity*.

Marx explained in the *Grundrisse* how this basic idea facilitates an understanding of history:

"Bourgeois society is the most advanced and complex historical organization of production. The categories which express its relations, and an understanding of its structure, therefore, provide an insight into the structure and the relations of production of all formerly existing social formations the ruins and component elements of which were used in the creation of bourgeois society. ... The anatomy of man is a key to the anatomy of the ape." (Marx, 1858, p. 102)

And Vygotsky adopted this same approach:

“I proceeded from the idea that the well-developed forms ... provide the key to the underdeveloped ones.” (Vygotsky, 1928, p. 319)

Every minor interaction which makes up the substance of day to day life is a drama, albeit an unremarkable and even forgettable drama. Certain conditions mark out some of those experiences such that they stand out from the background of experience and come to figure in the person’s development, that is, they become *perezhivaniya*, not just in the common phenomenological sense, but in the sense with which Vygotsky was concerned in his studies of child development. Sometimes such *perezhivaniya* are easily ‘processed’ and sometimes they challenge a person’s whole conception of themselves and the meaning of their life, and then the *perezhivanie* becomes material for the psychotherapist. Thus there is a developmental relation between *perezhivaniya* which manifest in qualitatively different phenomena.

Further, as the infant develops into the child and the child into the adult and the adult into the elder, the capacity to process and resolve *perezhivaniya* develops, as does every other aspect of the person’s psychological activity. The *perezhivaniya* of a child *cannot* be the same as those of an adult.

It is in managing the catharsis of the mature adult endeavoring to transform critical experiences in their life and give it a new meaning which will make life possible again, that the key to understanding the everyday experiences and development of the child can be fully grasped, and vice versa.

I believe that our understanding of each of these processes, and of the work of those writers who focused on this or that level of development of *perezhivanie*, is enhanced by understanding them *all* as *perezhivaniya*, realized under different conditions.

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