

# Fedor Vasilyuk's Psychology of Life-projects

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In 1984, Fyodor Vasilyuk published a seminal book on psychotherapy, *The Psychology of Experiencing* (1984), and according to Alex Kozulin (1991) it was “the first important contribution to the field of psychodynamic theory made by a Soviet author in the last 50 years” (p. 14). The aim of Vasilyuk's book was to provide a foundation for psychotherapists to assist patients dealing with life crises.

The key concepts of the work are переживание (*perezhivanie*), translated somewhat inadequately as ‘experiencing’ and understood by Vasilyuk as an active process of ‘working over’ and overcoming a crisis which has arisen in what he calls an отношение (*otnosheniye*), translated as ‘life relation’. ‘Life-relations’ collectively make up what Vasilyuk calls the subject's жизненный мир (*zhiznnyi mir*), literally ‘lifeworld’.

Crisis situations arise in a person's lifeworld from failures in life-relations, or conflicts between them. He says:

During the period of acute pain [such as following the death of a loved one, or failure to win a desired career move] *perezhivanie* becomes the person's leading activity ... which occupies a dominating position in the life of a person and through which his personal development is carried out.

Vasilyuk, 1984, p. 231

In his review of Vasilyuk's book, Alex Kozulin (1991) interpreted this as follows:

The individual must bring about the unity of the self, and not only as an internal conscious project, but as an actual existence in a difficult world. The ... unity of the self first appears as life-intent or life-project. This intent as related to the system of values is felt by a person as a ‘calling’, and in its relation to the spatio-temporal actuality of existence it becomes ‘life work’.

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## ***Otnosheniye* (отношение)**

*Otnosheniye* is the same concept found in Leontyev's description of the structure of personality, and translated as ‘life-relation’, but I agree somewhat with Alex Kozulin's view just quoted. ‘Life-relation’ has the advantage that as a relation it is neither internal nor external but both. And yet this term fails to convey what it is which is related internally and externally and fails to convey the drama with which it is to be associated. For Leontyev and Vasilyuk, the specific life relation at issue is a subject's commitment to a project.

An action is defined as a behaviour with a motive which differs from its goal and is therefore both subjective and objective; otherwise it is not an action. Thus there is a sense in which every composite of actions is also necessarily both subjective and objective.

Activities are both subjective and objective, but an activity gains its objective unity from the objectively synthetic tendency of the composite actions, each being carried out by a different person, each of whom may have a subjectively divergent intent. Activities are units of a social formation and exist independently of any participant's consciousness. It is the collaboration of the participants, with the aid of shared artefacts, which creates an objective unity, not the common goal as such.

The subjective unity of an activity, derived from unifying symbols and sensuous experiences, represents the activity to an individual subject. A subject's commitments form a structure, which, in Leontyev and Vasilyuk's terms, constitutes the subject's personality. These two structures, that of a subject's commitments and that of the projects making up a social formation – are not correlates of one another, but *the units of each are* correlates. The subject's external world is a part of the external world in itself, subjectively compiled from the subject's commitments.

The unity of the subject's external and internal world is the subject's 'lifeworld'. Units of this lifeworld are *otnoshiniya*. *Otnoshiniya* are both objective and subjective, but to properly convey what is entailed in an *otnoshiniya* we must use different words to denote their internal or mental aspects and their external, worldly aspects.

*Otnoshiniye* expresses both a subject's commitment (to a project) and the project itself, as something that exists independently of the subject (like 'my wife'). In the case of that project which comes to express the subject's life-intent, the words 'vocation' and 'life-project' are appropriate. It is this life-intent or life-project which integrates the subject's personality and during 'normal times', is the leading activity in the subject's personal development. The life-intent is built, generally over many years, with the development of the subject's will as the leading function in the creative formation of their personality.

The meaning of *otnoshiniye* for Vasilyuk is further clarified when he explains that the absence of resistant forces makes action meaningless, so an activity, and therefore an *otnoshiniye*, can exist only so long as there is resistance which must be overcome. Imaginary commitments, which in principle never see the light of the external world, don't count, and nor does pursuit of readily satiable desires. As Vygotsky (1928) wrote in the context of the development of character in disabled children: "The existence of obstacles creates a 'goal' for mental acts, that is, it introduces into development a future-directed mentality" (*LSVCW*, v. 2, p. 158), and "compensation is a battle, and every battle can result in two completely opposite outcomes: victory or defeat" (p. 159).

### **The Lifeworld (жизненный мир)**

The lifeworld is not merely an aggregate of a person's commitments, but is inclusive of the objective reality of these life-projects; so it is both subjective and objective in the same sense that an action is both subjective and objective, though we lack a word to adequately express this in English. Nor is the life-world simply an additive sum of these projects and commitments. It is a *structure* which includes the interconnections between the *otnoshiniya* both in the subject's belief and in reality, and hierarchical relations between them in the subject's life-work. The kind of interconnections and structures which are applicable to the internal world of the subject's commitments differ from the interconnections and structures of the material world where projects are played out. So for this reason, different characterisations must be made of the internal and the external aspects of the lifeworld.

Vasilyuk's theory is based on a four-part typology of lifeworlds:

This typology is structured as follows: the object of analysis is the 'lifeworld'. This has external and internal aspects, denoted ... as 'external world' and 'internal world'. The external world can be either easy or difficult. The internal world can be either simple or complex. The intersections of these categories give us four possible states, or types of lifeworld.

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The lifeworld is meant to be considered in the context of a specific crisis arising in a specific commitment, not necessarily the subject's life-intent, and not necessarily descriptive of a person's entire life and personality. Only the commitments and projects relevant to a specific life-crisis figure in the characterisation of the lifeworld.

The ease or difficulty of the external world describes the status of projects to which the subject is committed, that is, whether or not the subject is able to make progress towards their goal. An easy world is one in which no effort at all is required to attain the goal. A difficult world is one in which attainment of the goal has become impossible. Both are critical conditions. Normal life takes place between these two extremes.

The simplicity or complexity of the internal world describes the interconnections between a subject's commitments and their relative value or theoretical incompatibility, irrespective of their fate in the external world.

Each of the four types of crisis is characterised by a single word: stress, frustration, conflict and crisis.

1. *Stress* is the crisis of the *easy-simple* lifeworld. Here the subject has no goals and pursues no project because they demand and receive immediate gratification. Having no direction in which to strive, their diffuse anxiety is manifested as stress. A person may have many commitments, but pursues each commitment one at a time and encounters no resistance, so the subject's world is simple and easy. Vasilyuk calls this a hedonistic crisis and it is widespread in modern, prosperous, democratic states.

2. *Frustration* is the crisis of the *difficult-simple* lifeworld. The subject is focused on their life-defining project, but achievement of their goal is blocked and nothing can be done about it. The typical example of this crisis is a disaster in a treasured career which has hitherto defined a subject's whole life, and the subject may be unable to go on in a life which has now become pointless.

3. *Conflict* is the crisis of the *easy-complex* lifeworld. The subject is committed to more than one project, both of which are immediately attainable, but the options have nothing in common by means of which to compare them, except that the subject has a commitment to both and must choose which to pursue: "should I have a child or should I continue my career?"

4. The crisis of the *difficult-complex* lifeworld is a *life crisis*, combining features of the other three sectors. The subject's chosen life-project is blocked and there is a temptation to abandon former strong commitments to overcome blockages in others, and only a creative response offers the possibility of recovering a meaningful life.

On the basis of these four types of crisis, Vasilyuk defines a typology of four kinds of *perezhivanie*, respectively hedonistic *perezhivanie*, realistic *perezhivanie*, value *perezhivanie* and creative *perezhivanie*. The four types of *perezhivanie* are not restricted to the critical situation which constitutes the archetypal crisis generating the *perezhivanie*, but affect the entire life and personality.

### ***Perezhivanie* (переживание)**

Vasilyuk clearly states that he is not using the term '*perezhivanie*' ...

"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.

Interestingly, while acknowledging himself as a student of A.N. Leontyev's activity theory, Vasilyuk says that "there is no appropriate category or term available within this body of work" (p. 15). *Perezhivanie* had long existed as a category within mainstream psychology in the sense in which Vasilyuk mentions above. The more specific sense Vasilyuk uses is generally associated with the work of L.S. Vygotsky.

*Perezhivanie* is an *activity*, a particular type of work which produces "mental equilibrium, comprehension, tranquillity, a new sense of values, etc. ... reconstructing a psychological world and directed towards the establishment of correlation between consciousness and existence in terms of meaning, the overall aim of the world of experiencing being to give greater meaningfulness to life" (pp. 16, 31).

Like any other activity, the capacity for *perezhivanie* develops from rudimentary to mature as the subject grows from infancy to adulthood and throughout life, and utilises all the psychological functions and culturally available resources.

### Types of *perezhivanie*

1. The prototype of the *easy-simple* lifeworld is that of the *infantile* personality. *Perezhivanie* is impossible in the purely easy-simple lifeworld, because everything is provided and the pleasure principle faces no resistance. With immediate satisfaction there can be no contradiction or any situation creating psychological challenges to be 'worked over'. However, as soon as some small difficulty arises in this infantile life-world, the only psychological resources available are those already acquired in the easy-simple world of hedonistic, here-and-now satisfaction. Whatever the nature of the difficulty or complication which has arisen, the infantile response will be manifested in diffuse, senseless *activity*. *Perezhivanie* entails a denial of reality, a delusion that the need has in fact been met or that it was never felt. The world of the actual infant, which passes through severe crises in its social situation of development, is not in reality such an easy-simple life-world. Rather, Vasilyuk has in mind the caricature of an adult who retains the traits of infancy.

2. The prototype of the *difficult-simple* lifeworld is the *fanatic*. The *perezhivanie* of the difficult-simple lifeworld is realism, but *perezhivanie* in this world begins with *patience*. Patience differs from denial in that although it believes in a good which is not present, it does not deny the problem and believes it can be solved. But when patience runs out, and frustration sets in and it is faced with the impossible situation, the reality principle offers two alternative ways out. The first way is to postpone satisfaction, or lower one's sights and make do with a substitute for what is impossible according to the reality principle. In the second way, the subject abandons the former pursuit (the meaning of their former life) and takes up another which cannot be a substitute for the loss of the first or a continuation of it by other means. This may be what is called 'coping behaviour'.

3. The *easy-complex* lifeworld is an aesthetic and moral world. The *perezhivanie* of the easy-complex world is *value-perezhivanie*. The critical situation may arise when an activity attractive to the subject comes into conflict with the subject's life-project. Either the offending activity is morally discredited and postponed or abandoned, or the subject finds a way of mentally reconciling it as not really in contradiction to the life-project. Alternatively, *value-perezhivanie* is required in the wake of a wrecked life-project, searching amongst other projects for that which is most valued and could restore meaning to their life, such as 'in memory of' the lost life-project. Alternatively, the crisis may be resolved by a radical restructuring of the subject's entire value system, maintaining continuity through forgiveness and redemption. The principle of value-experiencing is *phronesis* or wisdom, rather than intelligence. Vasilyuk describes this re-evaluation as theoretical not practical work.

4. The *perezhivanie* of the *difficult-complex* lifeworld is *creative perezhivanie* and entails an entire reconstruction of the self.

- The first alternative is to continue the pursuit of the values which had hitherto defined one's life but were identified with a particular person or project which is no longer available. However, the identification of the life-intent with this particular form of realising it can be overcome by reformulating these values in more general, abstract terms, so they can be realised in some other particular form (or person), making the fixation on that former particular embodiment unnecessary.
- The second path is to discover that life has hitherto been based on false values and to formulate a new value system, but in such a way as to preserve the meaning of the past life, showing how it conquered error and finally won through to life's true intent.
- The third type of creative *perezhivanie* is connected with the highest stages of personality development as the life-intent moves away from egoistic projects and places the self in the service of higher motives, secure against any misfortune and for which the person is ultimately prepared for any sacrifice including life itself.

In a *perezhivanie*, the leading psychological formation in the lifeworld is the *will*. The integrity of the person as presented in self-consciousness is not something present and achieved, but has to be *actualised* in life-activity and the will is the only faculty which can achieve that actualisation. The will is the central psychological function in the formation of the personality. The will is first developed in childhood, according to Vygotsky, in the passage through the series of childhood life crises which separate the successive phases of childhood. These crises arise when the social situation of development which defines the social position of the child must be transformed for child to 'grow up' and the child break through to the next station in life. It is in these childhood crises that the will is formed as a concrete, higher mental function, and the various forms of psychic reflection which characterise a person are formed.

Likewise in adulthood, the personality develops precisely in the passage through life crises by means of creative *perezhivaniya*, which reconstruct the self while not discarding the former self, but allowing the past to be rationally understood from a new, higher standpoint.

## Social theory

Vasilyuk is exclusively focused on psychotherapy and there is no element of social theory in his work, beyond the use of *otnosheniye* as a unit of a subject's lifeworld, both in its internal and its external aspect. He provides a concrete basis for understanding how individuals relate to the wider world specifically through their participation in and commitment to collaborative projects. Vasilyuk's focus is on how new, generally more profound, commitments are made in the passage through crises that arise when projects fail or reach an impasse or when they come into conflict with other valued projects.

Social theorists would also be interested in how young people first begin to participate in projects and make their first commitments. In general, the formation of a commitment to a project is the mark of adulthood and the formation of a life-project the mark of maturity. Some young people enter adulthood directly, so to speak, already committed to a struggle for personal survival and the hope that the family will do better. Once crises arising in this simple-difficult lifeworld have exhausted the subject's patience, then the subject works over the situation in a realistic *perezhivanie*, and the subject can develop from fanaticism to the creative search for other means.

But in general, children do not enter adulthood with strong commitments to difficult projects. Vasilyuk tells us that when this simple-easy world is disrupted, the reaction is stress, generally

manifested in meaningless activity. “Any failure or situational mishap is likely to be perceived as a general life-crisis” (p. 148). So in fact, Vasilyuk’s ideas are applicable in the case of young people, once their carefree life has been disrupted by some life-changing experience.

### References

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