

The Problem of the Environment. A Defence of Vygotsky

by Andy Blunden, for academia.edu (2014)

In “Study of the Environment in the Pedological Works of L. S. Vygotsky,” published in the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, volume 43, no. 4, A. N. Leontyev presents a criticism of Vygotsky’s conception of the relation of a person to their environment for the purposes of psychological analysis. The article misrepresents Vygotsky’s position and instead of seeking to further develop lines of enquiry left incomplete in Vygotsky’s short lifetime, unfairly dismisses what is, if properly understood, a superior approach to that subsequently adopted by Activity Theory. Further, the article exhibits all the shortcomings of Leontyev’s own grasp of the methodological foundations for psychology laid down by Vygotsky, in ways which still hamper the development of Activity Theory today.

I shall begin with a synopsis of Leontyev’s argument.

The Prosecution

1. ANL points out (p. 12) that “A given object becomes the environment only when it enters the reality of [the] subject’s activity as an aspect of this reality.” Vygotsky would agree with this observation, and indeed it should be taken note of by those who today conceptualize the environment or context as an open-ended totality.

2. ANL then goes on to claim that “What *defines* the relationship between society and the natural environment ... is the state of its productive forces.” This gesture to orthodox Soviet interpretations of Marx is of little relevance to problems of psychology with which Vygotsky was concerned, and is in any case imprecise: if by ‘society’ ANL means a nation-state or some other social formation, then its relation to nature is mediated primarily by its relation to *other* social subjects, as well as its productive forces. But the point at issue is a *person’s* relation to their environment, and a productivist thesis here cannot be proved by *analogy* with Soviet ‘historical materialism’. Analogy is of no value at a level as fundamental as this.

3. ANL grants (p. 15) that human beings “have entered a new and active relationship with nature” and “their relation to nature becomes one mediated primarily by objects. But through this process humans enter into a certain relationship with other humans, and only through these relationships – with nature itself.” Aside from repeating LSV’s great breakthrough in psychology marked by the introduction of mediating artifacts into the subject-object relation, it is not actually correct to see objects, as it were, standing between subject and object. The relation is *both mediated and immediate*.

ANL credits LSV with the insight that “the role of the environment can be explained only through an analysis of the specific relations with the environment into which the child enters.” To deliver on this claim, ANL says “a certain unity must be found in which, united, the personal traits of the child and the features of the given environment are both presented. In Vygotsky’s thinking, such a unity is *perezhivanie*.” Asking (p. 16) “what is *perezhivanie*?” he says that “Vygotsky defines *perezhivanie* as the unity of environmental and personality factors, but this is a formal definition.” – Perfectly, true. Such a definition alone is preliminary at best, and it is a matter of regret that many English-speaking writers today are prepared to take such a formal definition in lieu of a concrete unity, taking personality and environment to be simply additive. But it is hardly Vygotsky’s fault if others try and fail to emulate him so long after his death!

4. ANL says (p. 16) “The most decisive question here is what *determines* a child’s *perezhivanie* in a given situation.” While formally correct, this is circular, for the *situation* is relative to the child’s interest in precisely the same way as *perezhivanie*.

ANL continues: “Introducing the concept of *perezhivanie* does not, in and of itself, solve the problem, ...” which is true, so long as we remain with the preliminary definition cited above.

But now we come to a substantive charge against LSV: “...*perezhivanie*, as the specific form through which the whole personality manifests itself, now occupies the place that formerly belonged to the whole personality of the child,” that is, determining the child’s *perezhivanie* “... a logical vicious circle.” He means: the *perezhivanie* determines the whole personality which determines the *perezhivanie*. ANL instead goes on to reduce *perezhivaniya* to the subject’s *activity*, which determines the personality.

5. The second charge against LSV is formulated as follows (p. 16-17): quoting Vygotsky, “The situation will influence the child in different ways depending on how well the child understands its sense and meaning,” from which ANL concludes that “This circle is thus broken: *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, and on the significance it has for him.” Here we must pay attention to “understanding” and “comprehension” as synonyms for the *meaning* of a situation. This is the charge of intellectualism.

6. ANL now puts the question, as he see it, “a question about the relationship between a child’s consciousness and his activity in the objective reality that surrounds him.” I presume that ANL is not seeking to substitute the unspecific term “objective reality” for the more precise term, “situation,” but just to show that this critique leads to “activity” as the explanatory key to personality. LSV here is charged with failure to see that it is *activity* and not *perezhivanie* which is at issue.

7. Next we come to a point which seems to bear only tangentially on his critique of LSV where he says (p. 17) “When a child is aware of something, for example, *this* table, it means that a given individual thing is represented by his thinking consciousness in certain associations and relationships, which, if the child’s thinking is correct, correspond to the table’s true communication and relationships.” This dogmatic (correspondence) conception of truth is not incidental, but is connected to deficiencies in ANL’s elaboration of Activity Theory in contrast to Vygotsky’s approach. Just as an aside, ANL cites Marx in *The German Ideology*, in footnote 8 for the maxim that language is “true consciousness.” I don’t have the 1932 edition of the Russian *MECW*, but this cannot be an accurate citation. Presumably it refers to: “die Sprache ist das praktische, auch für andere Menschen existierende, also auch für mich selbst erst existierende wirkliche Bewußtsein.”

8. ANL then moves (p. 18) to a consideration of LSV’s study of the “formation of generalizations that stand behind a word, and characterize the formation of consciousness as a whole.” The identity of intellect and consciousness opens the door to another misrepresentation of Vygotsky’s work which I will come to below.

9. In turning to LSV’s work on concepts, ANL asks us to “set aside the complicated idea of the different course of development of ‘spontaneous’ and ‘scientific’ concepts,” which renders null LSV’s work on concepts and opens the door to ANL’s dogmatic conception of truth. ANL concludes that for Vygotsky “meaning develops through a process of communication.” This is wrong.

10. ANL then asks (p. 19) if by “communication” Vygotsky means “material dealings” or the narrower meaning “communication using language,” and concludes that “for Vygotsky, it has only the second, narrower meaning. So, the process of verbal communication is defining for the child’s psychological development.” This leads to the third and principal charge against LSV: “Viewed as the subject of communication, [t]he child ... is transformed through this into an ‘ideal psychological’ subject, and the environment – into an ideal psychological environment.” Thus condemning Vygotsky

as an idealist: “the theory of the environment put forth by Vygotsky, locked in the circle of consciousness, loses its initial materialistic position and is transformed into an idealistic theory.” The premises are wrong; I will respond below, but everything from here on flows from the misrepresentations and misunderstandings committed up to this point.

11. ANL says (p. 22) that “Vygotsky attempted essentially to move the problems of the environment on to the plane of psychology,” and to refute these wrong positions ANL will “conduct our subsequent analysis from within the boundaries of a strictly psychological framing of the question.” From here on ANL offers elements of his own activity theory in counterposition to the “idealist” position of Vygotsky, but nothing new is introduced into the argument, so let us leave the case for the prosecution here and move to the case for the defense.

The Defense

Ad. 4: That *perezhivanie*, as a manifestation of the whole personality, cannot be the determinant of personality.

ANL here fails to understand how Vygotsky’s analysis by units allows him to avoid the reductionism into which ANL then ventures. If a complex process is to be explained by something *else*, then its analysis is *reduced* to the analysis of that something else. This is just what ANL did in his critique of Vygotsky – reducing the analysis of personality and interaction with the environment to that of consciousness. But Vygotsky does not at all reduce the analysis of the personality to that of consciousness. Analysis by units allows Vygotsky to avoid reductionism because the analysis begins from a concept of the whole complex process represented in a unit, not the whole, but a small fragment of the whole, such that the whole can be seen as being made up of very many such fragments only.

Furthermore, because the unit is a *developmental unit*, it reveals the properties of the complex product of that process in a way which would be impossible if we sought units of the product itself. So it is not a vicious circle, but a circle in the sense intended by Hegel (1830, §15) when he said that every science is a circle, a unity of whole and part which is self-explanatory and self-descriptive, rather than reducing the phenomena to something other than itself.

Ad. 5 That Vygotsky takes relation of the person to their environment to be an intellectual relation.

This is the same charge as that levelled by Lydia Bozhovich (2009, p. 67) in connection with the social situation of development. When Vygotsky says that *perezhivanie* depends on how a child “understands” the environment, this is interpreted as if a conscious, *intellectual* evaluation is meant. This is not the case. In Vygotsky’s essay (1934) on the problem of the environment, the eldest child of the wayward mother had “become the senior member of the family,” but this in no way implies that the taking up of the new social position was an intellectual act, the outcome of intellectual evaluation of the situation, any more than the terror expressed by the second child was a product of intellectual reflection. The child perceived and evaluated the situation in the only manner possible at its own particular level of development. The same point arises in reading Vygotsky’s work on the *social situation of development* in which it is not the environment as such which is determinant, but the significance for the child of relevant features of the environment – that at a certain point, the child becomes aware of needs which can no longer be met within the horizons of the existing social situation, setting up a contradiction in the existing form of collaboration between the child and its carers. Given that the concept of the social situation of development is intended to apply to newborns and infants, it is self-evident

that LSV did not intend an intellectual evaluation. The relation in question is always an age-specific relation, and not an intellectual relation. (See Blunden 2011.)

Ad. 6 That Vygotsky failed to see that it is Activity and not perezhevaniya which is at issue.

It is widely accepted that it was Vygotsky who introduced artifact-mediated actions as units for the analysis of the intellect – the relation of thinking and speaking. But Vygotsky carried out scientific investigations into a number of different problems, and in each case he used a different unit of analysis: word-meaning for analysis of the intellect and artifact-mediated actions for analysis of other aspects and kinds of intelligence; *perezhevaniya* for analysis of personal development and social situations of development for analysis of child development; and the defect-compensation for the analysis of disability. These are distinct problems and the solution of each in turn required the formation of a concept of the relevant process, this concept taking the form of a unit of analysis, the simplest, singular form of the process.

It is true, so far as I can see, that Vygotsky did not further develop beyond his formal definition the idea of *perezhevaniya* as units of analysis of the development of the personality, and consequently, as units of the personality itself. But to have identified the unit of analysis is to have laid the foundation of the science!

Perezhevaniya differ from social situations of development in two respects. A child is confronted by the need to make their way through a definite, culturally determined series of social positions towards taking up the position of an adult citizen in their community, with the support of a definite group of people. The social situations and crises which confront an adolescent or adult which may stimulate the subject to adopt a new social position and identity may be of any kind and may arise in any domain of life-activity, but development occurs only through the person's capacity to reflect on and "work over" the situation or experience and transcend it, that is, for *catharsis*. In the case of the child, the responsibility for constitution of a new social position falls to the child's carers, together with the child's pursuit of its newly-acquired desires.

ANL on the other, despite having given us the three-level structure of activity: operations, actions and activities, never fully grasped the idea of analysis by units. To claim that it is a person's activity that determines their relationship to their environment is an empty truism, a truism as empty as the claim that a person's relationship to their environment is determined by their experience. 'Activity' is just a generalized substance, not a unit at all. And by 'an activity', ANL means what is more properly called 'a type of activity', such as sport, or work and so on, that is, a *particular*. To function as a unit, we require an *individual* (or singular) entity – a finite concrete entity. What Vygotsky was claiming when he proposed that *perezhevaniya* be the units of analysis was that we have to pay attention to specific, finite, meaningful and hence generally emotion-laden, even challenging experiences in someone's life that *stand out*, so to speak, from the generalized passive background of experience. It is these experiences which make us what we are, provided we respond to them. (See Vasilyuk 1984.) For example, a person may hold various jobs over the years, and maybe live in several countries, but it is not at all the case that their personality will be determined by this life-experience: their knowledge, skills, command of languages, perhaps, but not their personality. But perhaps that time they helped a client and got sacked for it, and that time when they were in very dire straits and were taken in by a stranger? It is those memorable experiences, a finite number of them, which have arisen out of our activity, through which our personality is formed through catharsis – a concept which was invented in fact by Freud (1914), not Vygotsky. (It was Alfred Adler who invented the notion of defect-compensation, too. Vygotsky's originality was not so much in the discovery of these relations, but in their conception as 'units').

However, probably because Vygotsky's major work was a study of the relationship between thinking and speaking, the mistake is sometimes made that this – the intellect – was Vygotsky's standpoint in general. But this is not true. What Vygotsky did in this work was to take *one problem*, the solution of which had eluded science for centuries, and demonstrate how it could be solved for psychology by means of the selection of the appropriate unit as the starting point and unit of analysis. This work was to be an *exemplar* for psychological research, in that it was to show the way for research into the many problems of the human mind, *not* a platform for an intellectual reductionism! The deficiencies of this kind of reductionism was highlighted above in (7). Leontyev talks about 'society' just as he sometimes talks about 'activity', as a generalized substance or medium. However, as Marx (1859) insisted, 'society' does not exist, only definite social formations, be they markets, nation-states, feudal villages, armies or capitalist firms. Consequently, there is not a shred of relativism in Leontyev's social psychology; reflecting the norms of the Soviet era, there is just one 'correct' concept of the table, that which is dominant in the subject's social surroundings. But in reality, the social surroundings are not homogeneous, and quite different concepts may arise of one and the same entity according, not just from the subjective position of the subject themselves, but in relation to a variety of social formations (or projects or activities) having a bearing on the entity and the relation of the subject to that entity.

Ad. 8: That consciousness is exhausted by the intellect.

For Marxism, 'consciousness' denotes the totality of the subjective processes of a human being which mediate between a person's physiology and their behavior. By equating the intellect (the subject matter of "Thinking and Speech") with consciousness, represents Vygotsky as having made an absurd claim. Rather than being taken as a methodological exemplar, the discoveries of this work in relation to word-meaning are wrongly taken to *extend* to all the phenomena of consciousness. It is this theme – that Vygotsky interpreted *all* the phenomena of consciousness as intellectual processes, which opens the door to the accusations of "idealism" or "intellectualistic understandings of the child mind" (Bozhovich). The contrary is actually the case, in that Vygotsky did *not* make the mistake of trying to resolve the problem of forming concepts with the same unit with which he would resolve the problem of the development of personality or coping with a disability. And nor is his conception of concepts narrowly intellectualist, as his critics imagine.

Ad. 9 (a) That Vygotsky's distinction between scientific and spontaneous concepts are complications that can be dispensed with.

Again, it is important to understand Vygotsky's methodology. Vygotsky did *not* claim that "there are two types of concept: scientific and everyday." That Vygotsky took concepts this way is seen to be absurd when we consider that he criticized formal logic precisely for taking this typological view of things. The point is that *every* concept has within it two roots and two paths of development: on the one hand its acquisition in everyday interactions and on the other its acquisition from some institution where the concept is produced and transmitted according to definite practical norms and goals. Vygotsky chose Marxist social science (*not* just science in general) as the archetype of concepts which are transmitted through an institution and cannot be acquired through everyday experience. (See Blunden 2012.)

For Leontyev on the other hand, there is only one source of the true concept and that is productive activity according to the dominant norms of the community: all the rest is the outcome of the unacknowledged pursuit of subjective motives.

Further, in considering the acquisition of concepts in childhood, which extends in fact also to the acquisition of concepts by adults in everyday life, Vygotsky showed how

several different distinct sources and modes of concept formation are at work. Consequently, it is quite wrong to try to reduce the sources of concepts to one.

Ad. 9 (b) That Vygotsky believed that meaning develops through communication

In using sign-mediated and tool-mediated actions as units of analysis, Vygotsky (1934a) took the archetypical context for concept development to be the *collaboration* of a neophyte with a more expert partner together using a material product of the wider culture. Thus, for Vygotsky, communication is taken as *derivative* from collaboration. Inasmuch as a collaboration is always necessarily a collaboration towards some goal, together with others, it is in fact ‘an activity’. So the claim that Vygotsky did not have a theory of activity cannot be sustained. In my view, he had in fact a *superior* theory of activity to that developed by Leontyev (See Blunden 2013).

Leontyev took an activity to be pursuit of some motive which exists independently of the subject, but meets a need of the subject – a unity of the subjective and objective in just the same sense as *perezhivanie* is a unity of subjective and objective. But he did not problematize *how that object is conceived by the subject*, other than it representing either a subjective and unacknowledged motive, or representing a correct meaning, endorsed by the community.

Vygotsky on the other hand described a whole variety of stages in the development of the forms of activity under the heading of *concept formation*. *Nota bene*, Vygotsky did not analyze mental representations, but lines of development of collaborative activity mediated by artifacts. Vygotsky’s theory of concept formation outlined in chapters 5 and 6 of “Thinking and Speech” is a theory of activity, more nuanced and sophisticated than Leontyev’s, with a marked developmental character, in which it is the concept a subject forms of the object, rather than needs and the means of their satisfaction, *as such*, which play the motivating role.

Ad. 10. That Vygotsky had an ideal subject in an ideal (psychological) environment.

The charge that Vygotsky had an idealist conception of the subject and its environment thus rests on a series of misrepresentations. In particular, the intellectualist interpretation of Vygotsky’s theory.

For Vygotsky, a word meaning is an action mediated by an artifact, viz., a spoken word; a concept is a form of activity; communication arises from practical collaboration. The meaning of objects in the surrounding reality is given by how the subject conceives of them, but conception should not be taken to be an intellectual action, but as a form of activity which includes the object in one of the series of forms of activity described by Vygotsky in “Thinking and Speech.” When taken in this way to be forms of activity, concepts are not tied to rationalist or cognitivist ideas, abstracted from affect, but on the contrary, it is intellect which may be abstracted from *actions*, which necessarily entail affect, will, attention, etc., etc., as well as physiology and behavior. ‘Intellect’ is something abstracted from activity by the theorist.

Every different kind of organism or human being at one or another stage of their personal development relates to their surroundings, and perceives objects that may or may not meet their needs, and thereby excite or fail to excite desire and motivate action. Intellect stands only at the far end of a long series of formations of desire, each of which can be understood only in its own terms.

Ad. 11. That Vygotsky moved the problems of the environment on to the plane of psychology.

This charge rests on the same misrepresentations of Vygotsky’s work already dealt with. But it is true that *Vygotsky did not develop a social theory*. He approached the

cultural formation of the psyche by means of a study of the collaborative use of artifacts which originate in a wider culture, in some social situation, also the product of the wider culture. He observed that “the concept arises and is formed in a complex operation that is directed toward the resolution of some task,” (1934a, p. 123) “tasks that are posed for the maturing adolescent by the social environment – tasks that are associated with his entry into the cultural, professional, and social life of the adult world” (*ibid.*, p. 132). But he did not investigate the processes of formation of the social environment itself.

This Leontyev did attempt. Though he was primarily a psychologist, ANL’s Activity Theory did lay claim to being also a social theory. It is however a very poor social theory, and cannot be taken seriously as such. Indeed, it could be said that in Stalin’s USSR, conditions were not propitious for the development of a social theory. Both writers therefore can be charged with failing to develop a social theory to support their theory of psychology, but under extenuating circumstances. However, Vygotsky’s theory, developed by consistent application of the method of analysis by units, and with a sophisticated understanding of concepts as forms of activity, has a much better chance of a successful extension into social theory than Leontyev’s one dimensional, functionalist theory of activity.

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