

Human development as seen by Cultural Psychology

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The following is a *schematic outline* of human development as seen in Cultural Psychology. Central to human development for this current of Psychology is the concept of *lichnost*, a Russian word usually translated as ‘personality’, but *lichnost* has a much narrower scope than personality. It can be conceived of as a structure and hierarchy of commitments to life-projects. These life-projects (*otnosheniye*) are societal entities which have an existence generally independent of the individual subject; nonetheless, it is by their participation in such life-projects that an individual shapes the world they live in, in collaboration with others. On the other hand, the world shapes the subject by means of these projects to which the individual is committed.

Development in childhood cannot be rationally conceived in quite the same terms. Up until young adulthood, in general, the child is still engaged in the business of growing up, assembling the ‘higher psychological functions’ which are the mark of the mature human beings. These higher psychological functions are specific combinations of the innate, biologically-based psychological functions which the new born child shares with all the higher mammals. The child does not yet have commitments to life-projects, such commitments being the markers of adulthood. On the other hand, other aspects of what is more generally called ‘personality’ are largely formed in childhood rather than adulthood.

Without implying some kind of sharp boundary between childhood and adulthood, it is clear that somewhat different concepts of development are necessary for childhood and adulthood respectively. The child is subject to a series of ‘roles’, *concepts of age-status*, which are part of the cultural and social environment into which they are born. That is, the child is seen as a new born, an infant, a toddler, a pre-school child, a primary school child, a teenager or young adult – concepts which *vary from culture to culture* which encode the expectations the society have of the child and the means by which the child’s needs will be met. In turn, such a concept on the part of those around the child imposes certain horizons on it, limiting the needs of which they can be conscious, and the manner of satisfaction of these needs, whilst the internal development of their body and mind in turn respond to these impositions.

In each phase of development, marked by a ‘social situation of development’ with a certain concept of the child being acted out by the family unit, the developmental needs of the child determine that a characteristic ‘leading activity’ arises, pursuit of which drives the development of a specific ‘organ’. This ‘leading activity’ is the child’s equivalent of the adult’s ‘life-project’, being both the means by which child collaborates as part of the family unit and develops their personality.

It is a general law that there are two opposite ways in which a subject develops in connection with its social situation: either the situation sets the path of development for the subject or the subject overthrows their situation and establishes a new one.

For the child, this means periods of relatively gradual development in which the child adapts to their social situation, separated by 'difficult' phases in which the child 'acts out', overthrows the former social situation and establishes a new concept of their age status, and thus a new social situation appropriate to their needs, and then goes on to adjust to this new situation. At first the child is ill-equipped for their new role, appearing irrational to those around them, but they achieve growing competence within the new horizons.

For the adult, this means protracted periods in which their personal development is led by the changing demands of the life-projects to which they are committed, separated by periods in which the subject changes their commitments, generally responding to crises which have arisen in their life-world. These periods of change, *perezhivaniya*, are generally traumatic, while the periods following the traumatic phase, *catharsis*, are periods of readjustment to the new structure of commitments. '*Perezhivanie*' is taken to include both the period of traumatic change and the following catharsis. For example, an adult may be a socialist, and committed to the socialist cause they participate in a socialist group. Here they develop certain virtues appropriate to their role in that group. Alternatively, a young man marries and suddenly finds himself a father, responsible for raising a child and being a good husband, obliging him to develop aspect of his character which were previously in the background. But when the young man is divorced he must suddenly reorient himself to the life of a single man!

So in both phases of life we have a similar structure showing alternation between adaptation to the social situation and revolutionary overthrow of the social situation. Childhood differs from adulthood in that for children the social situation of development is determined by the adults in the culture responsible for the child's upbringing who *impose* a *concept* on the child with the corresponding leading activity, whereas the adult *changes themselves* by making and breaking their commitments to *life-projects*.

So it can be seen that neither child nor adult is simply the passive product of their social environment, though for relatively long periods their development is framed, or led, by their social environment. For example, a professional person will develop in a manner determined by the demands of their profession, even though it is the professional person themselves who must make that development. But in between such periods of relatively passive development there are periods of crisis in which the subject changes, not themselves so much as their situation, their relation to the world around them, demanding recognition from others, which in turn means imposing new social pressures on themselves.

Nevertheless, the relative passivity of those periods of gradual development do not imply 'continuous' change. More likely, many small leaps of development. The difference is not in the *size* of the leap but whether it is the *subject* or the *situation* which is being changed. Nor do these periods imply actual passivity as if the subject was putty molded by the environment. The difference is that the life-project sets the conditions and objectives to which the subject responds.

The child's relation to the world is mediated by the adults which care for the child. In childhood, what we mean by 'situation' is the set of relationships to adults which is defined by their age-status: new-born, infant, toddler, etc.

Although the series of age-status concepts imposed on the child is determined by the historically developed culture and social class into which the child has been born, these concepts have evolved culturally-historically in connection with the biological needs and limits of human development. Experience tells us that different cultures conduct their children to adulthood along very different paths. Consequently, each of the critical phases of development is qualitatively different from every other, characterised by a qualitatively unique development of the will. Nevertheless, a child can become an adult in any human society only by acquiring a certain finite range of higher psychological functions.

The relation of the adult to the world is mediated by the projects to which they are committed. In adulthood, what we mean by 'situation' is the subject's various life-projects, the relative place of those projects in the wider world, and the specific status of the subject within the project to which they are committed. This status will be one of a range of status positions which will be characteristic of the particular project: mother, middle-manager, amateur or professional, etc., etc. These status positions are special concepts of the self-concept of the project. For example, "research assistants" are found in scientific projects, while "pastors" are found in religious projects.

The above is a mere schema, leaving the character of the relevant forms of development open for investigation and further determination.