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Revisionist Revolution in Vygotskian Science: Toward Cultural-Historical Gestalt Psychology

Guest Editor’s Introduction

Lev Vygotsky is presumably the best-known and the most-cited Russian psychologist today. At least this seems to be true of contemporary Russia¹ and North America (Aleksandrova-Howell, Abramson, and Craig, 2012).² The popularity of Vygotsky in certain circles in Anglophone North America is truly enormous and is often described in terms of a “Vygotsky boom” (Cole, 2004; Garai and Kocski, 1995) or, somewhat critically, as the “cult of Vygotsky” (Yasnitsky, 2010, 2011b, 2011c). The beginning of this “Vygotsky boom” dates back to the end of the 1970s, and it was already a decade later, at the end of the 1980s, that a contemporary scholar astutely observed:

Present-day psychologists’ interest in Vygotsky’s thinking is indeed paradoxical. On the one hand, his writings seem increasingly popular among developmental psychologists in Europe and North America. On the other hand, however, careful analyses and thorough understanding of the background of Vygotsky’s ideas is rare. . . . Vygotsky seems to be increasingly well-known in international psychology, while remaining little understood. The roots of his thinking in international philosophical and psychological discourse remain largely hidden. His ideas have rarely been developed further, along either theoretical or empirical lines. (Valsiner, 1988, p. 117)

This observation was supported by other relatively rare, but equally critical voices of those who clearly drew a demarcation line between Vygotsky

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as such and his Western self-proclaimed followers, the “Vygotskians,” and their “Vygotskian” theories, particularly those in fashion in North America (see, e.g., Simon, 1987). However, criticism of the “Vygotskians” was by no means limited to Westerners, and within Soviet psychology of the 1980s one could clearly distinguish the relatively rare voices of dissent of those utterly skeptical of some of their compatriots’ claims of loyalty to Vygotsky’s tradition in psychology, most typically exemplified by the construct of the “school of Vygotsky–Leontiev–Luria” (Luchkov and Pevzner, 1981). A number of related rhetorical constructs normally accompanied this master narrative of the “Vygotsky–Leontiev–Luria” school, such as the legendary story of the “troika da piaterka” of Vygotsky’s most devoted students and followers and Leontiev’s so-called “Kharkov school of psychology”; for the history, most recent critical discussion, and deconstruction of this canonical narrative, see Yasnitsky (2011c). Criticism of Russian and Western “Vygotskian” scholars in the 1980s continued throughout the 1990s. Thus, different authors emphasized the biased and fragmented interpretations of Vygotsky by representatives of what was termed “neo-Vygotskian fashions in contemporary psychology” (Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991, p. 1) or “selective traditions” in Vygotskian scholarship (Cazden, 1996). Characteristically, the most fashionable “Vygotskian” phraseology in wide circulation in Western scholarly and educational discourse—such as the “zone of proximal development”—in the critical literature of this period were referred to as “one of the most used and least understood constructs to appear in contemporary educational literature” (Palincsar, 1998, p. 370), the construct that was “used as little more than a fashionable alternative to Piagetian terminology or the concept of IQ for describing individual differences in attainment or potential” (Mercer and Fisher, 1992, p. 342). All of these criticisms, however, look fairly moderate and innocent in view of the explosion of critical literature that is abundantly coming out in the new millennium.

The 2000s opened with the publication of Valsiner and van der Veer’s book *The Social Mind*, which systematically explored the history of the idea of the social origin of the human mind and qualified numerous references to Vygotsky in contemporary literature as rhetorical labeling, lip service, or, literally, as mere “declarations of faith”:

It is often an open question as to what functions such declarations can have in science. From a position of in-depth analysis, such statements seem merely to be stating the obvious (compared with the statements like the rain is wet or the rich are affluent). And yet, such general claims about the sociality of the human psyche are made with remarkable vigour and repetitiveness. (Valsiner and Van der Veer, 2000, p. 4)

Other authors have further variously discussed and criticized the “versions of Vygotsky” (Gillen, 2000), the “concepts and inferences curiously attributed to Lev Vygotsky” (Gredler, 2007), or “multiple reading of Vygotsky” (Van der Veer, 2008). Furthermore, some of these versions, such as the notorious “activity theory” and, by extension, its theoretical offshoot—developed pretty much in the name and the spirit of the apocryphal narrative of the “school of Vygotsky–Leontiev–Luria”—“cultural-historical activity theory” (aka CHAT) were referred to as a “dead end” for cultural-historical psychology (Toomela, 2000) and, moreover, for methodological thinking in cultural psychology, generally (Toomela, 2008). Some publications question whether anyone actually reads Vygotsky’s words (Gredler and Schields, 2004) and whether it is too late to understand Vygotsky for the classroom (Gredler, 2012). Overall, numerous inconsistencies, contradictions, and at times fundamental flaws in “Vygotskian” literature were revealed in the ocean of critical publications on this subject and are typically associated with—but certainly not limited to—the North American legacy of Michael Cole and James Wertsch (for massive criticism of these two particular research traditions, see Miller, 2011). Thus, on many occasions Miller mentions “distortions,” “misinterpretations,” and “misrepresentations” of Vygotsky’s ideas in the available translations of his works into English and, even more, in the works of his self-proclaimed Western followers. As Miller correctly points out, “texts that survived and were translated into English were either abridged and inaccurately translated, in the case of *Thought and Language* (Vygotsky, 1962), or artificially rendered into a book by selecting bits and pieces from various sources, in the case of *Mind in Society* (Vygotsky, 1978)” (Miller, 2011, p. 2). Furthermore, the six-volume *Collected Works* of Vygotsky published by Plenum in 1987 through 1997 included along with the translated text “various commentaries in the form of forewords, prologues, introductions, afterwords and epilogues” (ibid.). Miller openly accuses the editors of the translated *Collected Works* with “meddling with the original Russian texts by changing their order or presentation” and “including an additional layer of ‘local’ commentators,” all of which contributed significantly to the misrepresentation of Vygotsky in the West. As a remedy, Miller proposes going back to Vygotsky’s translations, which, somewhat strangely, he continuously refers to as “original texts,” and reading them disregarding the surrounding voices of editors and commentators.

All of these criticisms have led to a fairly insecure position for anyone attempting to meaningfully and securely deal with “Vygotskian” topics; for a summary of the numerous “challenges of claiming a Vygotskian perspective,” see chapter 1 in a recently published book (Smagorinsky, 2011). The present situation is neither tolerable nor sane, and something seriously needs to be done

in order to resolve numerous issues in contemporary Vygotskian psychology. In order to resolve the problem, first, the problem has to be identified. Thus, what are the roots of this general confusion about Vygotsky's legacy today?

One reason for problems with the Vygotskian legacy might be thought to be primarily related to the issue of translation of the texts of Vygotsky and the scholars of the "Vygotsky circle" (Yasnitsky, 2009, 2011c), most—if not all—of which, to the best of our knowledge, were originally written in Russian. As Smagorinsky remarks in the above-mentioned book, "even though I've been referencing Vygotsky in my own work since the early 1990s, I probably am basing my understanding on inaccurate and incomplete translations" (Smagorinsky, 2011, p. 8). Indeed, the quality of translation definitely remains quite an issue that has recently been systematically explored and overviewed in a paper with the characteristic title, "Vygotsky in English: What Still Needs to Be Done" (Van der Veer and Yasnitsky, 2011). Yet, even the best overview and programmatic statement on "what needs to be done" cannot substitute for action. Thus, the Anglophone readership is still waiting for a large amount of important, meticulous, and time-consuming translations, commentaries, editing, and reinterpretation work to be done.

One might also think that the main issue is the accessibility and availability of Vygotsky's works. Indeed, the fullest compilation to date, the six-volume collection of Vygotsky's works does not contain all of the texts ever written by this author, and in order to restore the entire set of published works much exploratory archival and library work still remains to be done. Luckily, however, new publications of Vygotsky's oeuvre are coming out these days, the most notable of which is the ambitious "*PsyAnima* Complete Vygotsky" project launched recently by the editorial team of the Russia-based international online journal *PsyAnima, Dubna Psychological Journal* that continues publishing extremely rare and virtually inaccessible works of Vygotsky that previously came out during his lifetime, but have never been republished since then.³ A complementary source on Vygotsky's legacy is the scholar's personal archive (in private ownership, and therefore, inaccessible for researchers), a major part of which is constituted by a collection of fragments, scrap-paper notes, and unfinished manuscripts. The content of Vygotsky's archive was quite comprehensively presented in a series of recent Russian and English publications by E.Iu. Zavershneva and her associates (Van der Veer and Zavershneva, 2011, 2012; Zavershneva, 2007, 2008a, 2008b, 2009, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2012; Zavershneva and Osipov, 2010). Based on these publications, it is fairly clear that Vygotsky's archival materials—as exciting and priceless as they might appear to a historian of science—are not of much value for the psychological community proper and will hardly add anything

utterly new to Vygotsky's legacy or be substantial enough to radically change the image of Vygotsky the scholar.

And yet, the roots of the problem are even deeper than that. The main problem appears to be Vygotsky's texts per se, more precisely, the reliability of Vygotsky's published texts as such. In fact, there is nothing new in claiming the disastrous quality of Soviet post–World War II publications of Vygotsky's works, which have been extensively and increasingly criticized for numerous mistakes, omissions, and distortions (Brushlinskii, 1996; Tkachenko, 1983; Tulviste, 1987; Van der Veer, 1997a; Van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991; Van der Veer and Yasnitsky, 2011).

All of these important earlier contributions notwithstanding, Zavershneva's landmark research opened a whole new line of studies in Vygotskian textology. In March 1994, in his introductory "Translator's Foreword and Acknowledgements," in volume three of *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky*, René van der Veer remarked on his approach to the task of translating Vygotsky:

I have not attempted to improve Vygotsky's style of writing although it was at times difficult to refrain from doing so. It is clear that Vygotsky—unlike, for example, William James—never rewrote a text for the sake of improving its style and readability. Hence the redundancy, the difficulty to follow the thread of his argument, the awkward sentences, etc. (Van der Veer, 1997b, p. v)

This notoriety of Vygotsky's discourse has long been considered one of the defining features of the discursive style of the genius and the idiosyncrasies of Vygotsky's creative talent. A possibility for an alternative interpretation was suggested, among others, by Boris Meshcheryakov, who, in his cursory overview of the bibliography of Vygotsky's works of the last decade of his life asserted:

Many items from this decade were written very quickly, in almost telegraphic style. Some works remain unfinished. It is certainly possible that some of the works that were published posthumously were not yet intended for publication (unfortunately, the editors of contemporary editions do not always warn the reader about the state and nature of the original texts). (Meshcheryakov, 2007, p. 155)

This assertion looks fairly possible. However, it was only after Zavershneva's pioneering archival and textological investigation that was first published in Russian in 2009 and in collaboration with Osipov (2010) that we received a solid confirmation of the suggestion that not all texts that we now know as Vygotsky's foundational works were completed by their author, nor that he meant all of them to be submitted for publication.

In one her studies, Zavershneva and her graduate student and collaborator Osipov scrutinized the unfinished manuscript on the crisis in psychology that was uncritically and without proper textological analysis published in 1982 under the title *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology*. As Zavershneva shows in her analysis of several of Vygotsky's works, the most important ideas on the disciplinary crisis in psychology were in fact published during Vygotsky's lifetime in a series of notably shorter papers that succinctly present the argument of the unfinished work on the methodology of psychological research. Zavershneva's research on *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology*, along with her closely related work on Vygotsky's notebook of 1926 from the Zakharino hospital and one of Vygotsky's shorter methodological papers of 1928 are first presented in English in this issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*.

The impact of these earlier Zavershneva studies has been enormous. To Western readers, only now receiving access to this research in translation, this situation might qualify as an instance of the "retroactive impact" of an earlier study that, however, considerably affected the course of subsequent published research without being published itself. Indeed, Zavershneva and Osipov's meticulous textological analysis of *The Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology* (Zavershneva, 2009; Zavershneva and Osipov, 2010) precipitated and greatly inspired a series of follow-up studies. One of these follow-up studies explored and documented differences in the three Russian editions of Vygotsky's *Thinking and Speech* of 1934, 1956, and 1982 (Mecacci and Yasnitsky, 2011). Even more substantial work has been done independently by two researchers who studied Vygotsky's *Tool and Sign [in the Development of the Child]* and compared the existing Russian and English versions of the text. Quite unexpectedly, the two scholars came to radically different conclusions as to the direction of the translation and the relative chronology of the creation of these two texts (Kellogg, 2011a, 2011b; Kellogg and Yasnitsky, 2011; Yasnitsky, 2011a, 2011d, 2012e). The version, according to which, as strange and counterintuitive as it may appear, the Russian text of the 1984 Soviet edition was created some time in the late 1960s as a result of translation from the only surviving English manuscript of unclear origin, but a translation itself in all likelihood, received confirmation in a series of subsequent publications that discuss the history of *Tool and Sign* as a "benign forgery" (Cole, 2012; Goldberg, 2012; Van der Veer, 2012; Yasnitsky, 2012d).

The impact of all of these textological studies on the state of art in the textology of Vygotsky's works is considerable, but it extends far beyond textology proper. This corpus of studies has laid a solid foundation for a revisionist movement in Vygotskian studies and constitutes the first contribution to this revisionist movement. In other words, the "archival revolution" that took place

several years ago (Yasnitsky, 2010) has by now outgrown its initial stage and developed into a full-fledged “revisionist revolution” in Vygotskian science. Apart from considerable textological and archival work, this revisionist movement was predated by studies that radically departed from the traditional genre of “great man” narratives. These studies interpreted the Vygotsky project as a collaborative, distributed, multiagent enterprise embedded in the large-scale processes of massive social, economic, and cultural transformation in the interwar Soviet Union (Shchedrovitskii, 1980/2004; Stetsenko, 2003; Stetsenko and Arievidt, 2004) and arrived at an understanding of this collaborative enterprise as the “Vygotsky circle” of several dozen collaborators, associates, and students of Vygotsky and Luria (Yasnitsky, 2009, 2011c). It is on this solid foundation of earlier studies that new research is being developed these days. The revisionist movement comprises two somewhat distinct yet closely interrelated strands of research.

First, the “critical strand” explores age-old biases and commonly held beliefs about Vygotsky’s terminology, conceptual issues, history of development of his works, and so on. For instance, a recent study by Keiler demonstrated that the expressions “higher psychological (mental) functions,” “cultural-historical psychology,” “cultural-historical theory,” and the “cultural-historical school,” contrary to popular belief, never occurred in Vygotsky’s works published during his lifetime, but were ascribed to him later, after his death, and incorporated into posthumous publications of his works (Keiler, 2012). More or less similar statements can be made about other famous “Vygotskian” phrases and expressions such as “internalization” or the “zone of proximal development” (research on Vygotsky’s phraseology and conceptual apparatus is currently in progress). This research most directly responds to the problem that Daniels, Cole, and Wertsch recently described as follows:

A close reading of Vygotsky’s work shows how his ideas developed and were transformed over a very brief period of time. It is difficult to reconcile some of the writing from the early 1920s with that which was produced during the last 2 years of his life. These rapid changes, coupled with the fact that his work was not published in chronological order, make synthetic summaries of his work difficult (Daniels, Cole, and Wertsch, 2007, p. 2).

In addition to textological analysis of the dynamics of the development of terminology and phraseology in Vygotsky’s discourse, substantial work has been done on the critical comparative analysis of various—typically, highly conflicting—existing bibliographies of Vygotsky’s works. As a result, another recent study of Vygotsky’s publications identified the list of Vygotsky’s most important works and produced a chronology of the composition of these works (Yasnitsky, 2011a, 2011d). These studies of the “critical strand” are most

closely interrelated with studies of the second strand within the revisionist movement in Vygotskian science.

Second, the “constructive strand” is composed of studies that aim at a better understanding of the actual historical development of Vygotsky’s theory, which is only now becoming possible on the basis of the “critical” strand of revisionist Vygotskian scholarship. Thus, as a series of recent “critical” studies shows, many of those texts that have long been considered as Vygotsky’s central and most important works were not considered as such by Vygotsky. As amazing as it may seem, a number of these works were never published during Vygotsky’s lifetime, nor even prepared for publication by their author, and, moreover, represent his earlier periods of theory building, the ideas of which he extensively criticized and mostly rejected in his later writings (for a discussion of Vygotsky’s self-criticism and rejection of his earlier views, see Yasnitsky, 2011b).

This critical literature raises a most obvious question: what is *the real* Vygotsky, the thinker of his most developed and most mature period? Or, more precisely: what kind of Vygotsky theory of the last two years of his life can we use as the foundation of Vygotskian science, possibly, of certain promise in the context of contemporary psychological—theoretical and applied—research? Several recent studies discuss the contours of this theory in its most mature form and quite correctly argue that, unlike Vygotsky’s theory and experimental practice of his earlier “instrumental” period of the 1920s, his thinking of the 1930s considerably shifted toward internal processes of artistic creativity and meaning- and sense-making (Miller, 2011; Rey, 2011). These important studies, however, do not take into consideration another extremely important aspect of Vygotsky’s work of the 1930s that is vital for understanding Vygotsky’s entire research project in its development during this period. As a recent study of the transnational history of the Vygotsky circle shows, the 1930s can be characterized as a period of dramatic convergence between two groups of scholars: the Soviet group of Vygotsky and Luria, and, on the other hand, the German-American group of Gestalt-psychologists led by Max Wertheimer, Wolfgang Köhler, and Kurt Koffka. Furthermore, the Soviet group was considerably influenced by the work of somewhat peripheral members of the Gestalt movement, such as Kurt Goldstein, Adhémar Gelb, and, even more important, Kurt Lewin. The latter was personally acquainted with Soviet scholars (Vygotsky, Luria, Birenbaum, Zeigarnik, and others), and his influence—to a large extent through the work of Lewin’s Russian expatriate Berlin students, who later returned to Russia—was particularly strong. The convergence between these two larger groups of scholars is evident in numerous personal contacts and their close interrelationships, migrations of scholars, international publications and collaborative research

projects, extensive intellectual exchange, and the circulation of ideas and experimental practices. A recent study describes and analyzes these activities under the banner of “cultural-historical Gestalt psychology,” which was evolving from the early 1930s until the end of the prewar decade (Yasnitsky, 2012a, 2012b, 2012c).

This “cultural-historical Gestalt psychology” has never been truly realized, partly due to the untimely deaths of the majority of the key scholars involved, and partly due to political unrest and turmoil before and during World War II. In any case, it is already clear that if the major synthesis of the ideas of the two schools of thought were to take place, we would have a really unprecedented psychology that would combine Vygotskian historicism, intellectualism, developmentalism, and a focus on culture with Gestaltist holism, organicism, and Lewinian acute interest in affective and volitional psychological processes. At the same time, both of these streams of thought apparently remained attuned to attending to social issues, problems of the arts and creativity, and processes of sense- and meaning-making. Thus, the work on reconstruction, or, for that matter, the construction of this “cultural-historical Gestalt psychology” is one of the key areas of current work for the “constructive” strand within the revisionist movement in contemporary Vygotskian science. Therefore, once again, as Vygotsky recognized some ninety years ago, we realize that we are dealing with the psychology of the future:

But of course this psychology of the future . . . will resemble our contemporary psychology only in name, or, as Spinoza so magnificently put it: *non aliter scilicet quam inter se conveniunt canis, signum celeste, et canis, animal latrans*, or, as the constellation Canis resembles a dog, the barking animal. . . . This is why the name of our science is dear to us—the name on which the dust of ages has settled, but to which the future belongs. (This issue, p. 104)

Notes

1. See the list of the most often-cited authors in 1988–2002 in the most popular Russian national psychological journal *Voprosy psikhologii* (www.voppsy.ru/indx.htm); for a list of the most-cited authors in 1986–2005, see <http://psyhistorik.livejournal.com/86054.html>.

2. Even though this publication mentions Vygotsky among several other major Russian scholars of notable import in the North American context (Bekhterev, Luria, Pavlov, and Sechenov), the disciplinary affiliation (i.e., physiology: Bekhterev, Pavlov, and Sechenov) and the frequency of appearance of these names in the text of the paper itself (not exceeding a dozen times for each of Bekhterev, Pavlov, and Sechenov; thirteen occurrences of Luria’s name) suggest the predominance of Vygotsky among the rest. Indeed, twenty eight occurrences of Vygotsky’s name in the text of the paper and the fact that an Appendix with “Recommended Reading (articles)

Arranged by Field” contains a special subsection titled “Vygotsky’s Contribution” are indicative enough of Vygotsky’s outstanding position among other Russian scholars in contemporary psychological discourse.

3. For the journal’s Web site, see www.psyanima.ru/.

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