THEORETICAL STUDIES

Research Article
https://doi.org/10.11621/LPJ-24-38
UDC 316.6

Cultural-Historical Theory and Social Psychology: A Nexus of Ideas

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Abstract

Background. The relevance of the stated topic is determined by two circumstances: the need to determine the main directions of the theoretical and methodological reflection of modern social psychology and the task of explaining the socio-psychological aspects of cultural-historical theory.

Objective. Consideration of the relationship between the main ideas of the cultural-historical theory of L.S. Vygotsky and the subject field of social psychology.

Methods. The article uses methods of deductive (axiomatic and hypothetico-deductive) and comparative analyses.

Results. The main theses of cultural-historical theory set the development and instantiation of the subject field of social psychology, starting with the well-known discussions of the 1920s. The main provisions can be identified as follows: the idea of the internalisation of social relations as a constructive mechanism of human socialisation; understanding the process of communication as instrumentally mediated by a system of signs which act as a means for a social subject to master his social behaviour; approval of the idea of human activity in interaction, the finite task of which is the formation of a common system of meanings. Using the example of similarities and differences in the historical views of L.S. Vygotsky and J.G. Mead, the authors analyse the possible range of understandings of interaction contextuality. It was the attention of cultural-historical theory to the analysis of interaction that largely determined the further interest of social psychology in the problem of "personality and/or situation", the solution to which is still debatable.

Conclusions. The determining role of L.S. Vygotsky's position for universal social psychology as well as for Russian is associated with the unremitting attention of researchers to one of the fundamental problems in the analysis of man and society, namely, to the problem of human interaction with the surrounding socio-cultural

environment. The requirement to consider the social context as a methodological imperative of modern social psychology sets the main direction for the further development of theoretical and methodological reflection. This main direction is the analysis of possible relationships between the social context and social changes, leading to the need for empirical development of two problems: the individual psychological foundations of social choice and a person's ability to resist the power of the situation.

Keywords: cultural and historical theory, social psychology, socio-cultural determination, social situation, sign, symbol, social context, personality

For citation: Bazarov, T.Yu., Belinskaya, E.P., Tikhomandritskaya, O.A. (2024). Cultural-historical theory and social psychology: a nexus of ideas. *Lomonosov Psychology Journal, 47*(4), 16–29. https://doi.org/10.11621/LPJ-24-38

Introduction

Basic ideas of cultural-historical theory and the formation of the subject field of social psychology

Lev S. Vygotsky is one of the most significant figures, not only in Russian psychology of the 20th and 21st centuries, but also in global science. Works of L.S. Vygotsky formed the basis of interdisciplinary knowledge that united a variety of humanities, including psychology, paedagogy, defectology, anthropology, and cultural studies. First, he created the cultural-historical theory, which became one of the methodological foundations for various areas of modern scientific knowledge, including Russian social psychology.

To discuss the role L.S. Vygotsky played in the formation of social psychology as a scientific discipline in Russia, we must turn to the 1920s, when the so-called "first stage" of discussion about the subject matter of social psychology took place.

As is widely known, the discussion of the subject matter framework and, in general, the possibility of such a scientific discipline as social psychology, was started by G.I. Chelpanov. From his point of view, social psychology should have been created within the framework of Marxism, while general psychology should have remained an empirical science, free from any ideological worldview. This idea of G.I. Chelpanov was not supported by a number of psychologists (especially by L.S. Vygotsky), who at that time were striving to rebuild the philosophical foundations of all psychology (Vygotsky, 1983b).

In essence, the discussion started by G.I. Chelpanov touched upon the problem of including psychology in the system of Marxist knowledge, but also posed the problem of defining the subject matter of social psychology; of identifying what, unlike other branches of psychology, this science was supposed to deal with. A variety of proposals were made (for more details see; Andreeva, 1997), but it still was not possible to solve the problem of creating Marxist social psychology in the 1920s. A clear definition of the subject matter of this science was not found. As G.M. Andreeva points out, two different versions of its understanding were mixed. On one hand, social psychology was considered a science of the social determination of mental processes; on the other hand, it was intended to study a special class of phenomena generated by the joint activities of people included in various groups (ibid.). L.S. Vygotsky, participating in the discussion, said that the subject matter of collective psychology (as he called modern social psychology at the time) should be "personal psychology in conditions of collective manifestation (for example, troops, church)" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 20).

As a result, during this discussion in the 1920s, only one aspect of the definition of the subject matter of social psychology was recognised, namely, the doctrine of the social determination of the psyche. However, this same idea extended to other branches of psychological science, which in turn hampered the recognition of social psychology as an independent discipline, delaying this point for several decades until the end of the 1950s (Andreeva, 1997, 2013a).

It can be considered that the very existence of a discussion regarding social psychology set the tone for further development of this science in Russia. Regarding the role of L.S. Vygotsky in the formation of social psychology, it should be noted that the ideas of cultural-historical psychology expressed by him in the 1920s and 1930s turned out to be consistent with that which, in the future, constituted the essence of social psychology. It formed its disciplinary sections and made it possible to subsequently most accurately determine the subject matter and the main theoretical and applied directions of social psychological research.

The theory of higher mental functions by L.S. Vygotsky is most directly related to the development of social psychology. It substantiated the social determination of the human psyche. From the idea of the historical origin of higher mental functions, L.S. Vygotsky proceeded to substantiate the cultural and historical determination of the process of their development. In essence, it is social (sociocultural) influence that is the main source of the formation of higher mental processes. His provisions on the indirect nature of mental functions and on the origin of internal mental processes

from activity, initially "interpsychic", led to the conclusion that the main mechanism of mental development is the mechanism of the assimilation of socio-historical forms of activity (Andreeva, 1997).

This interpretation was fundamental for solving many socio-psychological problems and determined the main vectors for the development of Russian social psychology. Thus, the internalisation of social relations as a constructive mechanism of human socialisation is still important for social psychology. L.S. Vygotsky said that a child, having just been born, is already a carrier of a certain culture and certain social connections (Vygotsky, 1983c). This, in turn, becomes manifest during the child's shared activities with the people around them, leading to the child's mastery of cultural values. In general, it is in communication with other people that a person's identity is formed, determined by the type of society and culture in which they carry out practical activities (Martsinkovskaya, Khoroshilov, 2022).

Processes of communication and interaction: signs, symbols, situation

The process of communication according to L.S. Vygotsky is based on the understanding and transmission of thoughts and experiences with the help of the systems of signs that have arisen in culture, primarily language. Being special psychological tools, these signs act as a means for an individual or social group to master their social behaviour. The latter means that social relations and social interaction are essentially instrumentally mediated. In other words, cultural signs serve as tools, using which the subject, influencing another person, forms their inner world, the main units of which are meanings and senses. As L.S. Vygotsky writes: "Thus, we can say that through others we become ourselves..." (Vygotsky, 1983a, p. 144). L.S. Vygotsky gives us an understanding of exactly how personality is formed in a sociocultural environment: in interaction with other people, which was and is a fundamental point for the socio-psychological understanding of the problem of personality. It is the inclusion of a person in the system of social relations through activity and communication, the development of social functions and the development of self-awareness that is the basis for socialisation. This will later be consistently revealed, substantiated and supplemented in the works of one of the founders of Russian social psychology, Professor G.M. Andreeva (Khoroshilov, 2019).

An interconnection of socio-psychological ideas and the creativity of L.S. Vygotsky can be seen in the intersection of the conceptual apparatus of cultural-historical theory and social psychology. Today, followers of L. S. Vygotsky around the world use several typical socio-psychological

concepts (role behaviour, social ideas, etc.) (see: Tolstykh, 2020). There are several reasons for this, including the decisive significance that the cultural-historical model of human development has had in psychology as a whole; the growing interdisciplinary connections of general, developmental, and social psychology; the general epistemological trends of modern psychological knowledge, which, despite all modifications, retains interest in one of the fundamental problems in the analysis of man and society, namely, the interaction of a person with the surrounding sociocultural environment, which thereby becomes an integral part of the cognitive system (Falikman, 2017).

As noted above, it is precisely the problem of interaction and thereby the analysis of the phenomenology of social behaviour (as a system of actions in relation to both the objective and social worlds), as well as the associated search for factors determining this interaction, that substantively unite the theoretical positions of L.S. Vygotsky and many ideas of social psychology. The widely known and already mentioned thesis of the creator of cultural-historical theory that "a personality becomes for itself what it is in itself, through what it presents to others" (Vygotsky, 1983a, p. 144) leads to various investigations, including through what means this presentation initially occurs. If some invariant of the subject field of social psychology was and remains a reference to the social context, which "always presupposes the presence of a person in the social environment, in communication and dialogue" (Grishina, 2017, p. 11), then the question also arises of how and by what means this presence is organized, by what means communication is carried out and what can be the result of the dialogue that occurs.

To answer this question, it is useful to take a closer look at some of the key ideas of L.S. Vygotsky, which seem relevant for modern social psychology, such as his understanding of the role of signs and symbols, as well as the situation (social context) of interaction.

The unquestioned merit of L.S. Vygotsky is the substantiation and development of the idea that human consciousness has a cultural and historical character, that the formation and development of the image of the surrounding world occurs based on a sign, "the interpretation of which is carried out by the individual in the process of social communication" (Martsinkovskaya, 2004, p. 19). Therefore, let us dwell on the similarities and differences in the understanding of the role of the sign in cultural-historical theory and in social psychology, in particular in symbolic interactionism.

To begin with, we note that the possibility of comparing various aspects of the cultural-historical theory of L.S. Vygotsky and symbolic

interactionism of G.H. Mead is obvious for many reasons. First, both concepts practically coincide in the time of their emergence, responding to certain epistemological challenges of the 1920–1930s. A certain coincidence can be noted in the choice of the main subject of analysis: both the theory of L.S. Vygotsky, and the concept of G.H. Mead puts the study of the mechanisms of social influence on the process of mental development at the forefront. Furthermore, these theories are comparable in terms of the level of their delayed impact on the further development of humanitarian knowledge. Although not fully appreciated by their contemporaries, both determine the main trends in the understanding of fundamental problems such as the relationship between the individual and the social in a person, the role of signs and symbols in the developmental processes of the individual and society, and the influence of interaction on the degree of arbitrariness of behaviour. Moreover, a detailed development the ideas of both L.S. Vygotsky and G.H. Mead (not only the final formation of these theoretical models, but also their empirical verification) occurred after the death of the creators, now representing a branched and often quite heterogeneous whole, at least from the point of view of its disciplinary incarnations. Thus, both the cultural-historical theory of L.S. Vygotsky, and the symbolic interactionism of G.H. Mead "live" today not only in the original fields of knowledge (psychology and sociology, respectively), but also within the framework of philosophy, cultural studies and linguistics. These lines of similarity often give rise to different definitions among science historians. For example, in foreign works on the history of sociology, one can find the qualification of cultural-historical theory as a Soviet version of symbolic interactionism (Abels, 1999), and in Russian works, accordingly, indications of American embodiment of cultural and historical ideas in the works of G.H. Mead (Martsinkovskaya, 2004). Although many of the leading American researchers of later times recognised the role that acquaintance with the work of L.S. Vygotsky played for them after the translation of his works in the USA (see, for example: Dafermos, 2016), in this case it is not possible to talk about borrowing. The thinkers did not know one another and did not suspect each other's existence. It is all the more interesting to trace the parallels of their views using the example of any of the system-forming ideas of creativity. As such, it seems interesting to choose their understanding of the sign and its functions.

L.S. Vygotsky presented the first version of his idea of the sign in "The History of the Development of Higher Mental Functions", written in 1931 (Vygotsky, 1983a). He understands signs as incentives and means, artificially created by humanity to control one's own and/or other people's

behaviour. It is the process of a person's appropriation of a set of certain initially external stimuli-means, and the process of their internalisation that, according to Vygotsky, constitutes the basis of human voluntariness — both in terms of activity and cognitively, leading to the formation of higher mental functions. At the same time, signs are not an "individual invention" of each person; they are acquired during communication (for example, communication between an adult and a child) and, accordingly, bear the imprint of the culture of the society in which this communication occurs. In other words, the idea of a sign appears to L.S. Vygotsky to prove the thesis that any psychological function exists first in a form distributed among several members of a social group, and only then turns into an internal form. Let us note here that the word is naturally thought of as a universal sign, which, in fact, sets the final "cultural context" of the entire position.

Similar reasoning forms the basis for one of the initial theses of symbolic interactionism, according to which human interaction is based on a system of common meanings. A detailed substantiation of this thesis is presented in the only work by G.H. Mead who preferred the oral tradition, Mind, Personality and Society (Mead, 1934), which would appear three years after his death in 1931. To analyse the interaction process, Mead introduces the concept of gesture, describing the evolution of gestural regulation of one's own and others' behaviour through the identification of gestures of different types: from direct behavioural manifestations to symbolic gestures. According to Mead, the beginning of any social interaction is the gesture, since the establishment of a connection between the gesture and the further detailed behaviour of a person creates the meaning of further interaction for the communication partner. The gestural response leads to a modification of the original gesture, the adequacy of which is confirmed or refuted. At the same time, Mead identifies two types of gestures: simple, characteristic of the early stages of evolution (for example, facial reactions of interaction partners as direct responses to each other's actions, which can also be observed in animals) and symbolic, i.e., available at later stages of evolution, during which there is an exchange of conventional meanings (i.e., gestures that have a fixed and common meaning for partners, causing the same reaction in them). The most "convenient" gesture-symbol, which has a generally accepted meaning, is the word ("voice gesture" in Mead's terminology). In other words, gestures-symbols (or meaningful gestures) are created by a person to regulate their own and others' behaviour in the process of communication, they are created jointly, and it is such communication that is human, and therefore cultural (according to Abels, 1999).

The similarity between these two arguments is clear. However, differences between them are of much more interest.

For L.S. Vygotsky, the appeal to the idea of a sign was generally of a subordinate nature and was caused by a predominant attention to the voluntary processes of thinking and activity (which is why the sign for Vygotsky was primarily instrumental in nature), but for G.H. Mead it had an independent meaning, since it is through the process of constructing symbolic signs that the process central for Mead, the process of interaction, is explained (and therefore the sign was not instrumental, but symbolic). Moreover, the ability to use such symbolic-signs formed during interaction to designate objects in the environment was thought of by Mead as a fundamental feature of human consciousness, underlying the formation and development of personality (due to the ability to imagine, among other things, oneself in the form of an object).

The idea that initially the psyche exists in a distributed form between communication partners and then passes into an internal form (see: Abels, 1999; Shotter, 1996) also stands out differently for these two thinkers. L.S. Vygotsky focusses on internalisation as the main mechanism of development, showing the process of "growing" signs into the fabric of higher mental functions. Similar processes described by G.H. Mead are largely formal in nature. Thus, for Mead, the formation of a reflexive "me" in a child is the result of his assimilation of an adult's responses in the form of significant symbols to his initially impulsive behaviour; as a result, the child begins to play out the roles that adults expect. However, the actual mechanism of this transition from the impulsive "I" to the reflexive "me" is not considered by Mead.

Finally, the attitude of the two thinkers to the idea of interaction, in which an important role for both scientists is assigned to signs and symbols, is also different. G.H. Mead focusses primarily on the interpersonal interaction, the main content of which is the construction of joint meaning, a common symbolic interpretation of what is happening, which can be thought both in isolation from an activity basis and within the broader social context. For L.S. Vygotsky, the fundamental fact is that in any interpersonal interaction a certain logic of culture is imprinted, and therefore its specific type (for example, children's play) is characterised not only by interpersonal relationships and those private agreements that follow from them, but also by a set of certain general rules that do not depend on a specific social group.

Understanding the social context: the legacy of L.S. Vygotsky and modern socio-psychological knowledge

It is in the formulation of the problem of the sociocultural environment as a context of interpersonal interaction as a situation that acts as a condition for the development of the human in a person, that one can see another point outlined in the works of L.S. Vygotsky which is significant for social psychology. Therefore, it is of interest to study how the ideas of L.S. Vygotsky overlap, mutually enrich and come into conflict with the views presented in socio-psychological research based on the analysis of a person's social environment, as well as the context of his existence and development.

The topic of the environment and the influence of external circumstances on the behaviour of people and groups has been the focus of attention in almost all areas of social psychology from the beginning of its emergence. This includes the study of cooperative groups, which made it possible to detect the effects of social facilitation and inhibition, and the experimental studies of interactive groups that have become standard. The latter served as an excellent basis for identifying key phenomena of group dynamics. We emphasise that an important feature of the approach of K. Lewin's school of group dynamics was the possibility of a new consideration of the opposition "personality — group", which involuntarily began to be understood as "internal and external" and "subjective and environmental".

It should be noted that the initial understanding of the context of human existence did not differ from the ideas of ordinary consciousness, which separates man and the environment: the environment of human existence was considered as a certain set of conditions external to him, as something external to the subject and independent of him, although influencing his behaviour and state (Grishina, 2016).

The external context of the lives of people and groups cannot be limited to the space of an experimental laboratory. The requirement to consider the social context as a broader framework of human life gradually turned into a methodological imperative for socio-psychological knowledge (Andreeva, 2013b).

The approach formulated by L.S. Vygotsky allowed him to "remove" the contradiction between the individual and the environment in his own way. For Vygotsky, the social situation acts as a source of development. Using specific, namely, age-related psychological material, he showed that the social situation of a child's development is made up of connections and

relationships between the child and adults and the social environment. These connections and relationships are characteristic of each age stage. Moreover, it is stated that the social situation determines the child's entire lifestyle, including the characteristics of his consciousness (Vygotsky, 1983c, p. 248).

Here, it is appropriate to recall the seemingly paradoxical remark of S. Moscovici, with which he begins the first chapter of "The Age of the Crowd": "If you asked me to name the most significant invention of our time, I would not hesitate to answer: the individual. And it is for a very obvious reason. From the emergence of the human race until the Renaissance, man's horizon has always been us: his group or his family, with whom he was bound by strict obligations. But from the moment when great travel, trade, and science singled out this independent atom of humanity, this monad, endowed with its own thoughts and feelings, possessing rights and freedoms, man placed himself in the perspective of I or myself" (Moscovici, 1996, p. 17).

The issue of the relationship between a person and a situation remains controversial. Attempts to discover and describe a "whole situation", without giving priority to either the contribution of the individual or the force of circumstances, allowed K. Lewin to propose the term "psychological living space" to designate the entire set of facts that determine the behaviour of an individual at a particular moment (according to: Grishina, 2016). However, among this essentially endless set of facts, one can also find those that do not allow the "power of the situation" to be realised. They certainly belong to the individual. It seems that it is this side of "situationism" as a paradigm that can be subjected to problematisation as proposed by L.S. Vygotsky.

What can counteract the influence of the situation on an individual level? Such a force, according to Vygotsky, is will. This is precisely "freedom from the situation" (Vygotsky, 1983, p. 158) and an understanding of the opposition to the power of a situation over people. Vygotsky points to the significance of meaningless judgments and actions — "nonsense that is possible only in humans." A senseless act is volitional because it requires a certain freedom from the power of momentary circumstances. Let it be the most minimal — freedom only in words, and not in deeds, thanks to the ability of the word to raise a person above the currently perceived situation, "creating an equivalent of perception in thinking" (L.S. Vygotsky's Notebooks, 2017, p. 346).

For now, let us leave aside the question of how to combine Vygotsky's expressed ideas regarding the situation of a child's development and a meaningless act that allows one to withstand the pressure of the external

situation. It is possible that there is no contradiction here, since for an adult the development of the will is the main indicator of successful passage through the "zone of proximal development". The goal of education then becomes quite clear — to prepare the child to withstand pressure from the situation. This assumption needs to be discussed separately.

From the point of view of modern social psychology, situational context is all that is associated with the era of permanent social change. Issues requiring research reflection are related to the relationship between social context and social change. Specifically, they can be formulated as follows. How do people make their choices today? How capable are they of resisting the power of the situation? L.S. Vygotsky emphasizes: "The most characteristic thing for mastering one's own behaviour is choice" (Vygotsky, 1983a, p. 274).

According to G.M. Andreeva, we can talk first about the inclusion of communication in the cognitive process. This idea is based on two postulates: 1) there is a predictable series of similarities in the behaviour of all people, based on ideas about common human nature acquired through experience; 2) there are also several undoubted differences in the behaviour of individuals or some types of them (Andreeva, 2013a). Therefore, there can never be two identical opinions even about one person, not to mention some more complex social objects.

As a continuation (or rather, based on the historical sequence, a prerequisite) L.S. Vygotsky's position is quite expected. In his opinion, just as people plough the earth with the help of a plough, they "plough" their psyche and behaviour with the help of signs. "A sign... is a means of psychological influence on behaviour — someone else's or one's own, a means of internal activity aimed at mastering the person himself; the sign is directed inward" (Vygotsky, 1983a, p. 90).

More than half a century later, G.M. Andreeva continues: "Since people must somehow understand each other, they inevitably exist in some common cognitive space, that is, share — perhaps within certain limits — the meaning of certain objects they cognise. The means of "sharing" meanings is communication, when the image of the social world is developed jointly, which involves a constant exchange of information" (Andreeva, 2009, p. 6).

Vygotsky's position here is quite consistent: "It is not thinking that thinks, it is man who thinks". Vygotsky further explained what he meant: "Since a person thinks, let us ask: what kind of person (Kaffir, Roman..., rationalist Bazarov, Freudian neurotic, artist, etc., etc.). With the same laws of thinking... the process will be different, depending on the person in whom it occurs. The whole point is in who thinks, and what role, function in the

personality thinking performs. Autistic thinking differs from philosophical thinking not in the laws of thinking, but in its role" (Vygotsky, 2005, p. 59).

We have already noted the peculiarity of how the concept of "role" is introduced into psychology in Vygotsky's understanding: as a function of one or another mental phenomenon in the general structure of the mental processes of a particular person of a certain historical era. Another concept is closely related to this one: the concept of psychological "role", which is defined, by analogy with the role of an actor, as "the natural range of capabilities of each function, determining the scope of its possible roles" (ibid., p. 60).

Perhaps this distinction between role and line, not sufficiently used by social psychologists, makes it possible to differentiate the contribution of the personal to the general situation. Apparently, the phenomenon of role acceptance is combined with the individual's agreement to accept the power of the situation and follow the norms and rules imposed by it. As for the role, as L.S. Vygotsky notes, there is a "change in the role of the mental process in the circle of its role". He clarifies "it is one thing for a neurotic to have a dream, which can "serve" sexual desire, another thing for a Kaffir tribe leader who views his dream as a guide to future actions" (ibid., p. 61).

Instead of a conclusion

In an amazing way, L.S. Vygotsky's texts help transform the existing (or emerging) approach to the study of the "personality — situation" dichotomy. His views cannot be clearly attributed to any of the camps known today: person-centred or situation-centred. The uniqueness of Vygotsky's view lies in the fact that he was able to show how an individual can resist the power of a situation. It is also surprising that, in Vygotsky's concept, the power of the situation is realised through a role model, and opposition to this power is possible through the development of will and the presence of a role. This means that the point is not in a contradiction as such, but in a unique interaction, which can be either balanced and developing, or conflicting and destructive.

To summarise, we emphasize once again: the ideas of L.S. Vygotsky laid the methodological foundation for Russian social psychology, as well as providing an understanding and instantiation of the subject area. They currently provide the opportunity for the further development of various facets of socio-psychological problems, which, in turn, contributes to the enrichment of the cultural-historical theory.

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Received: 04.02.2024; revised: 06.02.2024; accepted: 25.05.2024.