

## THE CONCEPT OF ACTIVITY IN SOVIET PSYCHOLOGY: VYGOTSKY VERSUS HIS DISCIPLES

ALEX KOZULIN\*  
Boston University

The subject of this paper is the concept of activity in the works of Lev VYGOTSKY (1896-1934) and his students. It has been chosen because of its importance for the understanding of the philosophical premises and historical development of Soviet psychology.

For a long time the problem of activity remained a "home affair" of Soviet psychology. In his classical *The New Man in Soviet Psychology* (1952) Raymond BAUER entirely neglected the concept of activity. More recent studies, like those of Ted PAYNE (1968), Levy RAHMANI (1973) and Luciano MECACCI (1979) mentioned the problem of activity, but hardly made it a central theme of their books (1). Only in the last few years has this problem received the attention it deserves. The major breakthrough occurred when a volume of translations *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*, edited by James WERTSCH, appeared in 1981 (2). This volume included the annotated translations of papers written by Soviet psychologists of different generations and an introductory essay by James WERTSCH. It would not be an exaggeration to say that WERTSCH's essay is the first analysis in English devoted to the notion of activity in Soviet psychology.

The concept of activity as an explanatory principle is found in the early papers of VYGOTSKY, e.g. "Consciousness as a Problem of the Psychology of Behavior" (1925) and "Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology" (1926) (3). In these papers the concept of activity was proposed as a possible remedy for that vicious circle of

\*ALEX KOZULIN: Boston University School of Medicine, Division of Psychiatry, 85 E. Newton St., Boston, MA 02118.

tautology in which introspective psychology and objectivistic reflexology alike put themselves attempting to explain consciousness through consciousness and reflexes through reflexes. VYGOTSKY suggested that the concept of activity could provide an explanatory system in which consciousness appears as its product. Consciousness thus retains only one of its former roles (the subject of psychological study) while activity takes the role of explanatory principle. The vicious circle mentioned above was therefore broken and a new perspective in a study of consciousness, or higher mental functions in VYGOTSKY's parlance, was established.

VYGOTSKY, however, concentrated on one particular type of activity: The use of signs, which seemed to him especially important for the formation of higher mental functions. He also was fascinated by an apparent analogy between the use of tools in the development of human civilization and the use of "psychological tools", mostly signs, in the development of individual consciousness. The theory of activity, therefore, acquired the character of a cultural-historical study of the development of higher mental functions. In VYGOTSKY's methodological model culture as a semiotic system was placed as a middle term mediating the world of things and the consciousness of individual. In his later works, *Thought and Language* (1934) and "Pre-history of the Written Word" (1935) VYGOTSKY's interests shifted even further toward psycholinguistics (4). The problem of meaning and sense became the center of his study.

The posthumous fate of VYGOTSKY's theories hardly could be called a fortunate one. The VYGOTSKY-LURIA cross-cultural studies in cognitive development were banned for they allegedly insulted the national minorities of Soviet Central Asia. The cultural-historical theory of higher mental functions in general was severely criticized for its "eclecticism" and resemblance to theories of "bourgeois" authors. In 1936 the Central Committee of the Communist Party issued a strongly worded decree which banned all pedological studies and accused pedologists of undermining the Soviet school system. The term pedology refers to a wide range of studies and testing techniques in child and educational psychology. VYGOTSKY naturally used the term pedology in his writings, which in the 1920s was almost a synonym for child psychology. Previous critique plus the decree against pedology gave enough grounds to put VYGOTSKY on a blacklist where his name remained from 1936 through 1956.

But for the purposes of the present study it is much more important that even those of VYGOTSKY's disciples who took risks to develop his theories under those unfavorable conditions, abandoned some of the essential ideas of their teacher. This fact seems especially important in a view of the later developments in the theory of activity. In the late 1930s the students and followers of VYGOTSKY, Alexei LEONTIEV, Alexander ZAPOROZHETS, Peter ZINCHENKO, Peter GALPERIN and others elaborated what might be called a revisionist version of the concept of activity. The outline of this new theory was published by LEONTIEV in 1947 under the title *An Essay in the Development of the Mind*. In 1959 this essay together with some other papers of LEONTIEV dedicated to the problem of activity appeared as *Problems of the Development of Mind* (5). In 1963 LEONTIEV's work won the Lenin Prize for scientific research and thus achieved a status of official Soviet doctrine. In the 1960s LEONTIEV also gained the status of the official interpreter of VYGOTSKY, and his interpretation

enjoyed a wider circulation than the original texts. Gradually VYGOTSKY came to be regarded as a mere predecessor of LEONTIEV.

The demarkation separating VYGOTSKY's theory and the issues developed by LEONTIEV's group involves the evaluation of the role played by external action in the formation of mental functions of individual. Peter ZINCHENKO once stated it clearly as follows: "The principal error of VYGOTSKY occurred when he reduced the socio-historical determination of the human mind to the influence of human culture on the individual. The development of the mind thus was restricted to the limited dialogue of human consciousness with culture, while material interaction between the human subject and reality was abandoned" (6).

ZINCHENKO, LEONTIEV and others claimed that the psychological analysis of activity must start from concrete, objective actions which through the process of internalization engenders the higher mental functions. VYGOTSKY's idea of psychological tools, as mediators between objects of action and the mental functions, was replaced by a model that envisaged the material actions as a middle term between individual and external world. In his 1956 preface to VYGOTSKY's volume, LEONTIEV reasserted his own interpretation of activity simultaneously suggesting that VYGOTSKY's emphasis on signs as the psychological tools was temporary, and that therefore LEONTIEV's theory of activity constitutes the authentic development of VYGOTSKY's research program (7).

LEONTIEV's group put a special emphasis on the structural study of the specific activities. LEONTIEV pointed out that "in reality we always deal with *specific* activities. Each of these activities answers a specific need of the active agent. It moves toward the object of this need, and it terminates when it satisfies it....In accordance with the terminology I have proposed, an activity's object is its real motive"(8). LEONTIEV suggested the following taxonomy of the structural elements of activity: specific activity correspondent to its motive, actions connected with goals, and operations which reflect the circumstances under which the actions are carried out. In concrete experimental studies, however, the notion of action clearly overshadowed all others. More than that, the notion of action ceased to be a mere component of activity as an explanatory principle and became a subject of psychological study *sui generis*.

This shift from the genuine program of VYGOTSKY to that of LEONTIEV remained unnoticed until the end of 1970s. A number of circumstances contributed to that situation. As I have already mentioned, LEONTIEV's theory of activity became in the 1960s an official doctrine of Soviet psychology. In holding an important position as Head of the psychological faculty at Moscow University for many years, LEONTIEV was able to control interpretations of his own theory as well as that of VYGOTSKY. And last but not least, many of VYGOTSKY's papers remained unpublished in the 1970s, while many others never were reprinted and for practical purposes were unavailable outside LEONTIEV's group.

The late 1970s was a crucial period for the reassessment of the theory of activity. In its development this theory ran precisely into the trouble against which VYGOTSKY had warned: the concept of activity appeared both as the explanatory principle and as the subject of study. The phenomena of activity were explained through the principle



of activity. Again a tautology replaced a theoretical explanation.

In philosophically sophisticated form the distinction between activity as an explanatory principle and as subject of research was made by Eric YUDIN in 1979 (9). YUDIN took pains to "reconnect" the notion of activity with its roots in the philosophy of HEGEL and MARX. YUDIN emphasized that it was HEGEL who made activity the universal explanatory principle and thus reversed the individualistic model of empiricism. In the philosophical theory an individual appears as an "organ" of activity. The latter, in its role of the ultimate explanatory principle, cannot be reduced to the manifestations of individual consciousness. On the contrary, these manifestations are referred to activity as their real source.

Further YUDIN pointed out that activity could also become a subject of specific study. In this case -and this is a crucial point-the structural elements worked out, for activity as an explanatory principle will be irrelevant. Activity as a subject of psychological study should have its own system of structural elements, and even its own explanatory principles. One and the same notion of activity cannot successfully carry out both functions simultaneously. But this is precisely what has happened in LEONTIEV's theory. Structural elements of activity once suggested in the framework of explanatory principle were later used in the context of the subject of study. It was another Soviet philosopher of psychology Georgy SCHEDROVITSKY who addressing a Colloquium on the early works of VYGOTSKY in 1979 elaborated the distinction between VYGOTSKY's genuine program and LEONTIEV's theory of activity. Since then the discussion has swept the ranks of Soviet psychologists. The alternative versions of the development of the concept of activity were suggested by Vasili DAVYDOV, Vladimir ZINCHENKO, Boris LOMOV, and others (10).

In 1979 LEONTIEV died. The position of the Head of the psychological faculty at Moscow University was then vacant, and the future of LEONTIEV's school uncertain. Polemics concerning the concept of activity began to have institutional overtones. It was not just a dispute over theoretical principles, but also a struggle between the legacies of LEONTIEV and VYGOTSKY, and ultimately a struggle for intellectual and institutional leadership in Soviet psychology.

In 1982 the long awaited *Collected Papers* of VYGOTSKY (in six volumes) started to appear. The first volume included "Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology" (1926) (11). This paper had an immediate impact on the discussion of the problem of activity. More than ever, Soviet psychologists were in position to judge for themselves the true program of VYGOTSKY, what place in this program was occupied by the concept of activity, and the course what had been proposed by LEONTIEV and his group as the extension of VYGOTSKY's work.

Their American colleagues could not boast the same achievements. Although in comparison with other schools of Soviet psychology VYGOTSKY's and LEONTIEV's works are fairly well represented, this does not mean that this representation is adequate. Let us take the first major work of VYGOTSKY that was translated into English, *Thought and Language* (12). As a result of the editing the English version shrunk to 153 pages vs. 318 pages of the Russian original, not to mention that the number of words per page is greater in the Russian volume. The editors not only eliminated almost

all passages referring to MARX, ENGELS and HEGEL, but also chose to skip philosophical and methodological discussions, and the poetic imagery used by VYGOTSKY. In the collection of VYGOTSKY's papers *Mind in Society* the editors took even greater liberties. They explained that: "The reader will encounter here not a literal translation of VYGOTSKY, but rather our edited translations of VYGOTSKY, from which we have omitted material that seemed redundant and to which we have added material that seemed to make his points clearer" (13).

Thus American scholars are confronted with a task of the reconstruction of the genuine thesis of a Soviet author from an abridged or poorly translated text. But even if we have properly translated material -as in the case of *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*- at least one major obstacle remains. As James WERTSCH once put it: "This obstacle, which is more important than all others combined, is the fact that it is often impossible to understand or interpret Soviet studies without an appreciation of the theoretical foundation that underlie them" (14).

For more than half a century the concept of activity remained a focus of Soviet psychological theory. Whoever understands the origin and development of this concept has the key to the theoretical foundation of Soviet research. My task, therefore, was to provide a minimal historical and methodological framework within which further studies in the notion of activity could be carried out.

#### NOTES

- (1) Raymond BAUER, *The New Man in Soviet Psychology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1952), Ted PAYNE, S.L. Rubinstein and the *Philosophical Foundations of Soviet Psychology* (Dordrecht: Reidel, 1968), Levy RAHMANI, *Soviet Psychology: Philosophical Theoretical and Experimental Issues* (N.Y.: International Universities Press, 1973), Luciano MECACCI, *Brain and History* (N.Y.: Brunner & Mazel, 1979).
- (2) *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*, James WERTSCH, ed. (N.Y.: Sharpe, 1981).
- (3) Lev VYGOTSKY, "Consciousness as a Problem of the Psychology of Behavior", *Soviet Psychology*, 17 (1979), 5-35; "Historical Meaning of the Crisis in Psychology" in *Sobranie Sochinenii*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1982) -in Russian.
- (4) Lev VYGOTSKY, "Pre-history of the Written Word" in *Umstvennoe Razvitie Detei v Processe Obuchenii* (Moscow & Leningrad, 1935) -in Russian; *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, MA: MIT-Press, 1962).
- (5) Alexei LEONTIEV, *Problems of the Development of Mind* (Moscow: Progress, 1981).
- (6) Peter ZINCHENKO, "The Problems of Involuntary Memory", *Uchenye Zapiski Kharkovskogo Instituta Inostrannykh Iazykov*, No 1 (1939), 153 -in Russian.
- (7) Alexei LEONTIEV & Alexander LURIA, "Psychological Views of Vygotsky" in Lev VYGOTSKY, *Izbrannyye Psikhologicheskie Issledovaniia* (Moscow: APN, 1956) -in Russian.
- (8) *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*, 59.
- (9) Eric YUDIN, "Activity as an Explanatory Principle and as a Subject of Scientific Study", *Voprosy Filosofii* No 5 (1976), 65-78 -in Russian.
- (10) Vasili DAVYDOV, "The Category of Activity and Mental Reflection in the Theory of A.N. Leontiev", *Soviet Psychology*, 19 (1981), 3-29; Vladimir ZINCHENKO, "Vygotsky's Ideas on the Units of Psychological Analysis", *Psikhologicheskii Zhurnal*, 2 (1981), 118-133 -in Russian; Boris LOMOV, "The Problem of Activity in Psychology", *Soviet Psychology*, 21 (1982), 55-91.
- (11) See also my "Vygotsky and Crisis", *Studies in Soviet Thought*, 26 (1983).
- (12) Lev VYGOTSKY, *Thought and Language* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT-Press, 1962).
- (13) Lev VYGOTSKY, *Mind in Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1978), x.
- (14) *The Concept of Activity in Soviet Psychology*, 3. See also my *Psychology in Utopia: Toward a Social History of Soviet Psychology* (Cambridge, Ma: MIT-Press, 1984).