

Vygotskian Analysis of the Crisis in Psychology

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A paradox in the contemporary reception of Vygotsky's theory

- Many contemporary scholars accept in an instrumental manner **several particular applications** of cultural-historical psychology (for example, the concept of Zone of Proximal Development) without serious reflection on the complex formation process of its **theoretical background**.

Contextualizing Vygotsky

- We should define two different historical eras and multiple social milieus – the **context of the Soviet Union** in the first half of the twentieth century and **different parts of the world of the twenty-first century** (Daniels, Cole & Wertsch, 2007).
- Dialogue between past and present to promote our **reflexivity** and **personal growth**

The development of ideas can be scientifically explained by three aspects:

- 1) the general **socio-cultural context** of the era;
- 2) the general conditions and laws of **knowledge**;
- 3) the objective demands upon scientific knowledge that follow from the nature of the phenomena that are studied in a given stage of investigation (Vygotsky, 1997)
- 4) a study of **particular subjects** that are involved in the production and application of scientific knowledge, the **development of their research programme**.

- a) the **socio-cultural context** in which this theory is formed,
- b) the **scientific context**, trends in the field of philosophy and science,
- c) **personality** of the thinker and the **development of his research programme**

The term 'crisis'

- German Krise or Krisis, French crise, and Latin and Spanish crisis) The ancient Greek word κρισις (derived from the verb κρινειν meaning 'to separate', 'to distinguish', 'to judge', or also 'to decide') meant 'evaluation' or 'decision', or even 'culmination'.
- In Ancient Greece 'crisis' was predominantly used as a **medical term**
- In the Enlightenment, the concept was also carried over into other areas, such as **politics, economics, sociology**

Crisis as a cyclical process (economic crises)

- the Chinese word for 'crisis' (危机 wei ji) is composed of two characters, one meaning **danger**, the **other opportunities**. The hope that an unwelcome crisis may have healing effects.

Our context of reception, interpretation, implementation of Vygotsky's legacy

➤ Social crisis

Crisis of Global
Capitalism

destruction of man
and life, increasing
dehumanization of the
society



Crisis of psychology

- inadequacy of the psychological theories in social practice
“psychological schisis”, *gap between theory and practice* (Vasiliuk, 2003)

“There are two science of psychology: the modernistic science primarily engaged in by academic researcher and the science of the practice primarily engaged in by practicing psychologists”
(*Polkinghorne* , 1992).

- a crisis of disunity or fragmentation of the discipline and its knowledge (Staats, 1983)

the specializations is competitive, mutually discrediting or even incommensurable (Goertzen, 2008).

- Philosophical tensions (realism versus constructionism tension, the tension between explanation and understanding, mind–body problem, subjectivism–objectivism, qualitativism–quantitativism, agency–mechanism, atomism versus holism etc.).

Three ruptures in psychology

(Yurevish, 2009)

- Rupture between **various schools** and trends
- Rupture between **natural science** and **humanitarian psychology**
- Rupture between **academic research** and **applied psychology**

Who is it?



Psychology as a Janus-faced discipline.

- The god of beginnings and transitions, endings and time. Gates, doors, doorways
- **Rapture between natural science and humanitarian psychology**
- **Earthquakes** mostly happen at the border of different tectonic plates.
- Bridging the disciplinary gap and creating a dialogue between the natural and the human sciences.

Social context of the appearance of Vygotsky's theory

- Luria (1979) argued that the atmosphere immediately following the Revolution stimulated incredible levels of activity to systematic, highly organized scientific inquiry.
- “Our science could not and cannot develop in the old society. We cannot master the truth about personality and personality itself as long as mankind has not mastered the truth about society and society itself. In contrast, in the new society our science will take a central place in life.” (Vygotsky)

Crisis in psychology (late 19th - early 20th century)

- Brentano, Willis, Buhher, Binswanger, etc.
- Psychology as a “problematic science”. Psychology as a discipline **in a permanent crisis**
- Willy: a growing fragmentation in psychological research.
- the situation of psychology at the beginning of the 20th century by the metaphor of the ruin of an ancient city: “The psychologist of these days is like Priam sitting among the ruins of Troy” (Nikolai Lange)

Unique human side of *Vygotsky's personality*

- *“Crisis is not a temporary state , but the path to one’s inner life” (Vygotsky, Letter to R.Levina)*
- human life as a drama or a tragedy
- ✓ **Medical Crisis** (*his illness*) *“stand firm in critical situations”*
- ✓ Crisis of his relationships with the regime and the scientific community. He was accused for not being a Marxist *“I do not want to live, they do not consider me a Marxist”* .
- ✓ **Crisis of his scientific School.** *Breaking of relationships with the closest students and colleagues (Leontiev, etc.)*
- ✓ **Crisis States** *of his research programme. Self criticism.*

- ***Vygotsky's life as an Optimistic tragedy***

Despite the grief and many *tragedies*, *optimism* and joy for *life*.



- “Experiencing, taken in the most abstract sense, is a **struggle against the impossibility of living**, in a certain sense it is a **struggle against death in life**” (Vasilyuk, 1991,).
- “*perezhivaniye*”
- Stanislavski: 'experiencing the role': "*you must live the part every moment that you are playing it, and every time*".

The historical meaning of the crisis in psychology: a methodological investigation”

- was written in 1927, but it was only published in 1982
- Differences between manuscript and publication of Crisis in 1927. (Zavershneva, Vygotsky’s private family archives) - “archival revolution” in Vygotskian studies
- Disappearance of the term “Superman”
- in the new socialist society —”Man will make it his purpose to master his own feelings, to raise his instincts to the heights of consciousness, to make them transparent, to extend the wires of his will into hidden recesses, and thereby to raise himself to a new plane, to create a higher social biologic type, or, if you please, a *superman*” (Trotsky , 1925)

Vygotsky's Creative Evolution (three periods)

(Veresov, 2005)

- **From reflex to social behaviour: materialistic psychology (1917-1924).** “Pedagogical Psychology”, “Psychology of Art”, “Methods of Reflexological and Psychological Investigation”
reflexological explanation of consciousness
- **From social behaviourism to psychological materialism (1925-1927)** . “Consciousness as a Problem in the Psychology of Behaviour” (1925) “A Historical Sense of Psychological Crisis” (1927).
objective, natural scientific analysis of consciousness.
social behaviourism
- **Cultural-historical theory (1927-1934).**
Cultural Origin and Development of Higher Psychological Functions

The historical meaning of the crisis in psychology: a methodological investigation

- was written when the cultural-**historical theory of the development of higher mental** functions hadn't yet appeared.

The epistemological and **methodological reflection** on the **state of psychology** took place before the appearance of the cultural-historical psychology.

Diagnosis of the crisis

- There is **no unitary basic methodology** common to all conceptions of the particular historical epoch. “What we have is a system of fighting, deeply hostile, mutually exclusive, methodological principles and each theory... has its own methodological merit” (Vygotsky, 1997a, p.262).

The essence of a crisis in psychology

- is not only the struggle of different views and approaches, but “...*the struggle between different types of science, separate disciplines which tend to turn into a general psychology, i.e., to subordination and exclusion of the other discipline*” (Vygotsky, 1997a, p.295-296).
- Behind all systems, directions and theories, contemporary psychology is divided into two parts, **two struggling tendencies**: “Two psychologies exists - a **natural scientific, materialistic** one and a **spiritualistic** one” (Vygotsky, 1997a, p.300).

The causes or driving forces in the crisis in psychology.

- “...the main driving force of the crisis in its final phase is the development of applied psychology as a whole” (Vygotsky, 1997a, p.305). Applied psychology was first confronted with a new, highly developed practice, i.e. industrial, educational, political, military practice.
- “...practice reforms the whole methodology of the science”. (1997e, p. 306)
- “The center has shifted in the history of science: what was at the periphery became the center of the circle. One can say about **applied psychology** what can be said about **philosophy** which was rejected by empirical psychology: “the stone which the builders rejected is become the head stone of the corner”.

How can the Crisis in Psychology be Overcome?

- need for the foundation of a new, revolutionary psychology which will *overcome (aufgehoben) those contradictions.*
- 1.systemic analysis of social phenomena.
- “Psychology is in need of its own *Das Capital*” (Vygotsky, 1997, p.330).
- Vygotsky searched for the “**living cell**” which could offer a starting point for discovering the laws of the complex system. “Mechanistic approach: mechanism of one reaction as a “cell” (**internal contradiction**)
- Vygotsky changed the analysis by functions (elements) into **analysis of units**. A“unit” is a product of analysis that possesses *all the basic characteristics of the whole. The mechanism of a reaction as a “unit”.*

- Mistakes as an essential and internal moment of a scientific investigation

How can the Crisis in Psychology be Overcome?

- **2.historical method.** “...historical study simply means applying categories of development to the study of phenomena. To study something historically means to study it in motion” (Vygotsky, 1997b, p.43).
- The historical examination of the development of psychological knowledge and especially the crisis situation in psychology appeared before the emergence of the idea of the development of psychological functions and prepared the conditions for the foundation of cultural historical psychology. The emergence of **cultural historical psychology** as an attempt to **overcome the crisis in psychology**.
- Moving with and beyond Vygotsky a **unity of continuity and discontinuity**
- “Science commences to be understood, i.e., from the perspective of its dynamics, growth, development” **dialectically in its movement**

Limitations of Vygotskian Analysis of the Crisis in Psychology

- 1. The methodological critique of the main psychological approaches and theories remained incomplete and imperfect, because L. Vygotsky in that period **did not even draw up a positive research programme**.
- 2. For Vygotsky, the “new psychology” could only be a materialistic, deterministic psychology. The adoption of one side of the contradiction (materialistic point of view) and **the exclusion of the opposite side of the contradiction** (idealistic point of view) does not lead to overcoming the theoretical contradictions as the main source of the development of scientific and philosophical knowledge. The main task is to historically explore the conditions of appearance, formation and resolution of the philosophical problems (in this particular case, the contradiction between the Materialist and Idealistic point of view) .

Posing questions as a creative research strategy

- “A correct statement of the question is no less a matter of scientific creativity and investigation than a correct answer—and it is much more crucial. The vast majority of contemporary psychological investigations write out the last decimal point with great care and precision in answer to a question that is stated fundamentally incorrectly”(Vygotsky, 1997e, p. 258).

Russian intelligentsia

- What Is to Be Done? (Nikolay *Chernyshevsky*)
- *Who is to Blame?* (Alexander *Hertzen*)
- Transition from the question of **what has been done** to the question of **What Is to Be Done; who will do it?**
- Chernyshevsky’s call to “transfer into the present as much as you can from the future”

***Fearing a crisis or provoking a crisis in science
and not only?***

- The growth of scientific knowledge is impossible without a crisis.
- Chance to turn a *crisis* into a life-changing *awakening*.