

The Disintegration of Vygotsky's Research Collective

Vygotsky's vision of a large research collective working for a common cause was never realized. At times, it appeared that it might be possible to establish such a collective, but on each occasion Vygotsky was required to move to a new Institute and to work with new colleagues. For example, after graduation his students (e.g. Levina, Morozova) were sent to work in different cities all over the Soviet Union, and so in order for any cohesive program to be developed, they had to travel to Moscow where Vygotsky regularly organized so-called internal conferences. The closing down of the Academy of Communist Education and the resulting relocation of some of Vygotsky's co-workers (Bozhovich, Leont'ev, Luria, Zaporozhec) to Kharkov also compromised the research program. Moreover, in Kharkov, Leont'ev developed his own view of cognitive development in response to ideological criticism. Leont'ev distanced himself from Vygotsky's ideas in an obituary written in 1934 (pp. 188-9) in which he emphasized that mediation processes are rooted in material and social, or rather societal, activity and renamed the cultural-historical theory "societal-historical theory." He also referred to the public debate about the merits of reactology for an

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assessment of Vygotsky's theory (*Itogi diskussii* . . . , 1931). It is clear that in replacing Vygotsky's emphasis on signs as means of mediation between objects of experience and mental functions with the idea that physical action (labor) must mediate between the subject and the external world, Leont'ev aligned himself with the official ideology. According to the ideological gatekeepers, labor (physical activity) had to take precedence of speech (see also Leont'ev, 1935/1983, and chapter 16).

The growing difference between their opinions did not escape Vygotsky's attention and in August 1933 he wrote Leont'ev, who was by then in Kharkov, a letter about the need to clarify their respective positions.

I feel already and not for the first time that we stand before a very important conversation, as it were, for which we both, apparently, are not prepared, and the contents of which we can only vaguely imagine – your departure [for Kharkov] – is our serious, maybe irremediable, failure, resulting from our errors and real negligence of the cause that has been entrusted to us. Apparently, neither in your biography, nor in mine, nor in the history of our psychology, will what has happened be repeated. So be it. I am trying to understand all this in the Spinozist way – with sadness but accepting it as something inevitable. In my inner thoughts I deal with it as a fact, as something that happened. The inner fate has to be solved in connection with the outer but – of course – it is not fully determined by it. That is why it [the inner fate] is not clear, is [only] vaguely visible, through a haze – and my concern with this has caused the greatest anxiety that I have experienced in the last years . . . You are right that first of all we have to get rid of the need to dissemble . . . That is why I consider it [your decision] correct, despite the fact that I judge everything that happened with A. R. [Luria] differently (and not happily). But I shall return to that some other time . . . (Vygotsky in a letter to Leont'ev, dated August 2, 1933)

We can see in this letter that Vygotsky felt their positions had diverged so much that their “common cause” (note again the almost Messianic tone of his letter) was threatened. We also see that some undescribed difficulties had arisen between Luria and Vygotsky. Puzyrej – whose notes to the unpublished Soviet edition of Vygotsky's letters we have used throughout this book – has suggested that this passage refers to the fact that Luria at some point had joined the Kharkov group and headed the Psychological Section of the Ukrainian Psychoneurological Institute, the section that Leont'ev was to lead later. One can well understand Luria's decision to do this, for the conditions offered to him in Kharkov were excellent. At the Psychological Section – which was to be developed into an independent institute within a few years – he was allocated sixteen rooms, fifteen collaborators, and 100,000 roubles per year! (Luria in a letter to Köhler, dated March 6,

1932). Still, after much deliberation, Luria left the Kharkov group and concentrated his activities in Moscow once more. To this story should be added the account given by Vygotsky's daughter of the personal relations between the psychologists during that period. According to her (personal communication, September 1989) toward the end of 1933 or the beginning of 1934 Vygotsky and Leont'ev stopped seeing each other. Apparently, Leont'ev had written a letter to Luria in which he stated that Vygotsky's ideas belonged to the past and suggested that Luria started to collaborate with him, without Vygotsky being involved. At first Luria agreed, but then he had second thoughts about the plan, and showed Leont'ev's letter to

Vygotsky. Naturally, Vygotsky was hurt and angry and he wrote a harsh letter to Leont'ev, at which point they stopped seeing each other,¹ although it would appear that they continued to exchange letters about research affairs. Understandably, relations with Luria, too, became somewhat strained after this event.

One can see, then, that in the final period of his life even Vygotsky's staunchest allies of the preceding years, Luria and Leont'ev, were contemplating leaving him and for very understandable reasons, not the least of them being the growing ideological pressure. They no longer felt unconditionally bound to pursue the "common cause," that is, the new psychology of man that Vygotsky envisioned. In view of Vygotsky's attitude towards this cause, he must have had immense problems not construing their behavior as a personal betrayal in this, the most difficult period of his life, but to see them rather as the inevitable outcome of personal, scientific, and ideological developments. Once again, he had an opportunity to think of Spinoza's words in *The Ethics* (1677/1955, p. 128), where the great philosopher explained that one should not abuse or deride human emotions but try to understand them.

¹It was only by the end of 1955, when the ban on Vygotsky's writings was about to be lifted, that Leont'ev (with Luria) again paid a visit (his last) to the Vygotsky family. The reason for the visit was to look in the private archives for writings that might be (re)published (Vygotskaja, personal communication, September 1989).