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## Introduction

### The Formation of Activity Psychology

This issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* publishes a collection of works by the eminent Russian psychologist Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontiev (1903–1979). These works are unified both temporally—they were written in the 1930s—and thematically; they represent different aspects of the psychological theory of activity, which was first developed by A.N. Leontiev and the school he founded during those years.

As is well-known, this was a time when the totalitarian regime in the Soviet Union was tightening its grip, a time of political repression and a general lack of freedom, of the ideologization and politicization of the sciences, especially the social sciences. Those who attended scientific conferences during those years can recall how, from meeting to meeting, participants would disappear, and nothing would be known of their fates. Under such circumstances, in Kharkov (which was then the capital of the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic), the Kharkov school of psychology (A.N. Leontiev, A.V. Zaporozhets, L.I. Bozhovich, P.Ia. Galperin, P.I. Zinchenko, V.I. Asnin, G.D. Lukov, A.I. Rozenblum, and others) emerged and acquired increasing importance within the world of science. It was this school that generated and began to develop

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the ideas of the activity approach to psychology, the fundamental significance and promise of which is now becoming increasingly clear.

The very existence of the school and its exceptional productivity under such difficult sociocultural conditions are unique evidence in support of the main idea of Leontiev's Activity Theory, an idea discussed in an article included in this issue, "Study of the Environment in the Pedological Works of L.S. Vygotsky"—the idea that not the *environment*, but the *activity of a subject in the environment* is the source of psychological development. This work, probably written in 1937 and first published in 1998, was until then unknown to historians of psychology, as it was not included by Leontiev himself in the list of his scholarly works and was found in the archives of the Russian Academy of Education by the late I.V. Ravich-Shcherbo only in 1997. It appears that the article, devoted to a critique of the pedological ideas of L.S. Vygotsky, was written in reaction to events of the time. Soon before this, in 1936, the regrettably well-known decree by the Central Committee of the Communist Party, "On Pedological Perversions in the People's Commissariat of Education," had been published. However, a careful analysis of this work (performed by A.A. Leontiev) shows that the criticism of L.S. Vygotsky formally required at that time had been transformed by Aleksei Nikolaevich almost to the point of being an apology for Vygotsky's views (see Leontiev, Leontiev, and Sokolova, in press). It is also important to note the article's explanation of the need to introduce the category of "activity" into the science of psychology. Criticizing the theories of psychological development that see development as determined either by the convergence or opposition of two factors—heredity and environment—A.N. Leontiev insists on the dialectical "removal" of this dichotomy, an attempt that, in his opinion, was already represented in Vygotsky's conceptual framework. Leontiev emphasizes Vygotsky's assertion that "psychological analysis must not destroy the unity of the subject and his environment, but must be directed at the very *relationship* that the personality enters into with the reality that surrounds it" (p. 22). However, Leontiev considers Vygotsky's proposed analysis of *experience* as forms of existence of this relationship insufficient for the definitive "removal" of this dichotomy, inasmuch as experience is merely a "trace" (result) of the *subject's activity* in the environment: "How a given object appears in experience is determined by the activity of the subject in relation to this object" (p. 26). Therefore, the introduction of the category of "activity" into psychology is sufficient to definitively remove this dichotomy.

The second work, "Transference of Action as a Function of Intellect," written by A.N. Leontiev in collaboration with V.I. Asnin, summarizes an unpublished manuscript by both authors that is in the A.N. Leontiev archive. In all likelihood, the study was conducted in the earliest days of the Kharkov school, that is, in

1932–33. During that period, the Kharkov school was engaged in the creative development of Vygotsky’s ideas about meaning as generalization, but its “activity” aspect was emphasized: generalization was viewed not so much as “generalized reality” (as an “image” of reality), but more as “crystallized activity” (*generalization-activity*). Within the Leontiev school, a “transference” method appropriate to the generalization-activity under study was developed. In this study by Leontiev and Asnin, a unique “staircase” of progressively more complex problems was used. While all the problems could be solved using one common principle, each problem demanded its own specific solution using various visually based operations. It was necessary to increase the complexity of the tasks in increments in order to show—on the basis of the success or failure of the preschool subjects in solving the problems—the thresholds of possible “transference” when changes were made to the specific conditions while the basic principle of the solution remained the same. As a result, it was established that transference not only reveals generalizations present in the child, but forms new ones.

The third work, “The Problem of the Development of the Intellect and Learning in Human Psychology” (written by A.N. Leontiev in collaboration with A.R. Luria as a talk to be delivered at the psychology congress that was supposed to take place in Madrid in 1937, but was moved to Paris), contains a reference to the above work and other studies by the Kharkov school dedicated to exploring a problem that was widely discussed at that time—the relationship between skill and intellect. In the opinion of the authors of the work, this question can be adequately studied only by viewing it in the context of the relationship between the subject and reality, that is, in the context of the subject’s activity. Outside of this context, skill is most often viewed as something acquired purely mechanically through experience (reducing it to the level of elementary physiological processes), and at the same time is contrasted with intellectual behavior, as if the latter takes place independent of experience, instantaneously, on the go, by means of insight (a sudden understanding about the relationships between things). The main flaw of such a solution to this problem is the *dichotomization* of the high and the low in the subject’s psyche. Such a dichotomy between the low and the high is *eliminated by the introduction of the category of “activity”* and by viewing skill and intellect in the context of activity. In the opinions of the authors of the talk, what is most important is “what form . . . skills and intellectual processes take in different psychic structures corresponding to different levels of development of the relations between subject and reality, and in what relationships . . . they enter into with one another at different stages of the development of activity” (p. 36). The text mentions studies conducted by V.I. Asnin in the Kharkov school of two ways that skill can form (one way is the mechanical repetition of one and the

same movement without awareness, the other is the automatization of an action that is initially conscious). These studies contributed to the development of the problem of the structure of activity—specifically, two types of operations were identified as ways of carrying out an action and their psychological differences were shown. Also summarized in the text are related studies of the relation between everyday concepts and scientific concepts that were conducted by the Vygotsky school and labeled “outstanding” by Leontiev and Luria.

A special place among the works being published here is held by the outline of A.N. Leontiev’s theses for his talk at the All-Union Institute of Experimental Medicine. A distinct methodological orientation distinguishes this text: it addresses extraordinarily important problems within the science of psychology and the nature of the psychic in the context of activity-oriented psychology. In particular, attempts to create a psychology without the psyche are sharply criticized—attempts founded on the old introspective understanding of the psychic as something subjective, phenomenal, and inactive. In contradiction to this view it is asserted that the subject of psychology is a particular reality that is accessible to scientific study. This reality is a dialectic unity of consciousness and activity, in which consciousness itself is understood as activity, and activity, as mediated by an ideal representation of its object in consciousness, practically realized through the word. Later in the paper, the subject of psychology and the subject of physiology are distinctly divorced. In A.N. Leontiev’s opinion, to understand the psychological is to understand how I can acquire the meaning of a given situation—for instance, the situation once noted by Charles Sherrington (“Now I understand the joy with which the Christian martyrs went to the stake”). What is most important for the science of psychology here? To study the situation of “going to the stake” in and of itself, to try to grasp the meaning of going to the stake for the martyrs (the latter case would be the very study of experience urged by L.S. Vygotsky)? No. The most important thing is to understand just *how, through what activity, and why* the going to the stake described by Sherrington acquired such a specific meaning for the subject. In this way, within this work by Leontiev, the category of “activity” is firmly linked to the category of *meaning*: the situation in and of itself is not a psychological fact (it is a sociohistorical fact), but it becomes one when it takes on meaning for the subject within the context of the activity he or she is carrying out. Meaning is truly a “trace” of activity (the above-mentioned concept of “experience” introduced by Vygotsky was equivalent to Leontiev’s concept of “meaning”). In turn, the mechanism for carrying out (realizing) meaning is a physiological fact and should be studied by physiology. However, in studying the connections between the physiological and the psychological, it is necessary to go from psychology to physiology—the task the subject sets himself also determines specific physiological processes

allowing for the realization of the appropriate activity, as convincingly proved in N.A. Bernshtein's (1896–1966) conception of the “physiology of activity,” which is related to A.N. Leontiev's theory of activity. In other of his works from the 1930s and 1940s (in particular, in the *Methodological Notebooks*, published only in 1994—see Leontiev, 1994), A.N. Leontiev, in developing the category of “meaning,” showed that any psychic phenomenon can be viewed as a form of existence or as the result of a conceptual reflection of the world by the subject through his activity in this world.

This issue of the journal also includes two short works by Leontiev from 1940: “The Genesis of Activity” and “The Fundamental Processes of Mental Life.” They present the fundamental ideas of Activity Theory and elaborate the significance of the category of “activity” for solving a number of psychological problems (specifically for understanding the particular features of and reasons for the emergence of consciousness). These works can be recommended for learning the fundamentals of Activity Theory, as they present the main concepts and tenets in compact theses. In particular, the psychological structure of activity (known to us through Leontiev's late work, “Activity, Consciousness, Personality,” 1975) is presented: activity–motive, action–goal, operation–task. The work “The Fundamental Processes of Mental Life” also addresses the subject of psychophysiological functions (sensory, motor, mnemonic, etc.) as the realizers of activity. In Leontiev's opinion, they are the essential preconditions for activity, but activity, action, and operation are not derivable from them and are not reducible to them.

Thus, the selection of works by A.N. Leontiev presented here from the 1930s provides an integrated understanding of the reasons for the emergence and the fundamental tenets of the theory that is known to international science as Activity Theory, the psychological theory of A.N. Leontiev and his school. The subsequent development of the tenets of this theory take the form of numerous works by both Leontiev and his colleagues and followers—which are worthy of their own issue.

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