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Problems in the Psychology of Activity

I am generally fully in agreement with everything that Aleksei Nikolaevich* propounded the last time, and it seems to me to be groundbreaking, and of prime importance for discussion of this problem. But it seemed that one shortcoming of the report was that not everything was considered in it. For instance, modifications and amendments, some particular, some fundamental, should be made in the original concept of activity in accordance with new studies, in accordance with the new tasks, both theoretical and practical, that face us. Some of these are problems in dealing with activity as an object of psychology.

I think that at one time we confused the psychological with the nonpsychological, that is, with some sort of logical, sociological characterization of activity, of its basic components and the structural interrelations that occur therein, and so forth. Aleksei Nikolaevich ironically mentioned praxeology and its attempts; but the matter was that if praxeology does what it does poorly, this did not mean that this activity should be characterized in extrapsychological terms or that it was not very important, very essential for psychology. As often happens, psychologists have to do someone else's work. Lev Semenovich Vygotsky took up a number

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*Reference is to A.N. Leontiev's contribution to the above book.

of logical questions in his time, and now Gal'perin and El'konin are working on them. Aleksei Nikolaevich [Leontiev] constructed some sociological models in his time, and so on. Evidently, all this was necessary.

But now it seems to me that to characterize activity, we must introduce a number of clarifications, amendments, and corrections. For example, some of the components, such as, for example, an action, were earlier given a more objective characterization, one more in accord with the reason why an activity is generally accomplished, or with the fact that an action is directed toward a specific target object, and that the required modifications are made in that object regardless of what the subject thinks or experiences in this regard, and so on. Other concepts, for example, operations, were described in terms of some other criterion, that is, from the standpoint that they are automated, that they disappear from the field of consciousness.

It seems to me that we must eliminate this ambiguity and attempt, in particular, to delineate objectively a sociological characterization of the structure of activity and make the necessary changes and clarifications in it. I shall not attempt here to explore the entire range of such changes; but it seems to me that we must, for example, *alter the concept of goal*, since what was initially intended was some sort of primitive types of activity, which amounted to capturing, gaining control over, an object, whereas in productive activity the goal is to modify these objects in a certain direction. Hence, perhaps *it would be necessary to come up with a concept and an object of activity* that would be amenable to such changes. As for operations, what has happened is that when we use this concept in psychology, we come into conflict with the way it is used in logic and in other sciences, for example, in technology, in military matters, and so forth, where operation is understood to mean an entire system of actions both automatic and nonautomatic.

Another aspect of the matter is that, in order to overcome the peculiar Robinsonade in this characterization, in the sense that although we wanted to bear in mind that the subject of activity is a social being—man—nonetheless, in the study of activity we did not take into account that *the action of one person is constantly being incorporated into the aggregate activity of a group of people and that, therefore, the forms of such associations, forms of coordination differing in motives, goals, tasks, and means*, must be taken into account in describing the structure of activity. In any case, we must take into account some structures of activity since this is methodologically very important.

Second, Aleksei Nikolaevich said that in psychology, external, material, practical activity should always be considered in its relation to mental reflection. This is obviously true. But how should we understand this relation? Is it some sort of real process that has its own content, its own transitions, transformations, and conversions into material actions, into ideal actions, and so on?

Under Vygotsky's leadership we began to look at these questions, but then we somehow drifted away from them because other problems arose, and they were pushed into the background. Essentially, for a long time we were forced to be content with the fact that some external correlations were established between activity and mental processes, for example, noting that, given such and such specific characteristics of activity, or such and such a structure, such and such a motivation of activity, and so on, such and such changes in mental processes occur, although the mechanisms of these changes and the very nature of these mental processes were not studied in particular. However, now so much new data have been accumulated that we should take the first step toward characterizing this relationship. These are data touching on orienting-investigatory activity and its regulatory role in behavior, or, for example, the studies of Aleksei Nikolaevich and other authors on the formation of perceptual actions, and, finally, the fundamental series of studies on the formation of mental actions and concepts by Petr Iakovlevich [Gal'perin] and certain others.

Now some kind of general laws are emerging. Beginning with a study of the formation of the motivational-affective sphere of a child as related to a child's acquisition of basic social-moral values, we can say that *the process begins with the first external affective actions, after which these actions undergo changes and become captive to internal experiences of perceived or presumed events*. On the basis of these actions, what we call an affective image is formed in which are crystallized the meaningful characteristics of a situation and its significance for the subject; and on this basis, further emotional regulation of actions takes place. This regulation concerns the dynamic ethical aspect of these actions.

Next naturally arose the hypothetical assumption that this orienting-investigatory activity is not mental activity in the broad sense of the term: it occurs on the basis of an executory activity and then fulfills a regulatory, correcting role in the latter. I take up this line of discussion

with optimism inasmuch as discussion of this problem on the basis of tangible material will enable us to move forward on this question toward an understanding of the nature of mental processes and their connection with the practical, material activity of the subject. But there are a number of problems that I regard with less optimism because, for the time being, I see no adequate ways of dealing with them; moreover, they seem to me more difficult and less clear now than several decades ago.

Perhaps a discussion of these questions at present would cause us to digress, so we should not take them up now; still, they should be pointed out. I am thinking, in the first place, of *the problem of the relationship between development and learning*. What happened was the following. Under the influence of progress made in investigating the formation of intellectual actions and concepts, we traversed a path from the position, handed down to us by Lev Semenovich [Vygotsky], that learning plays a leading role in development to another position, that *development is learning*, that *learning is a form of development*. Was this good? I doubt it. First, for theoretical reasons. It seems to me that in taking this path, we ran the risk in fact of totally denying development its own special logic, its internal contradictions, its internal self-movement, that is, we ran the risk of being forced into a position of *refined mechanicism, superbehaviorism*, which, generally speaking, is not very attractive and of little relevance to the matter at hand.

I remember very well all of the discussions of Sergei Leonidovich Rubinshtein at the time to the effect that the external acts through the internal, and of G.S. Kostiuk that there are contradictions between the form and the content of needs and capabilities; this was all useless blather, because clearly we were not talking about what was needed. The most extreme mechanist would never deny that the action of one object on another depends not only on the first object but also on the other object. Fire acting on iron will heat it, and melt it, or, in the case of wood, will burn it up. This everyone understands; and the foolish discussions on the point that this depends on experience, knowledge, and the like, led nowhere; and the end result was that the problem remained a problem. It does not follow from the fact that someone provides a poor solution to a problem that there is no problem. It must be resolved.

I am compelled to take up discussion of these problems not only by theoretical considerations but also by deeply practical life problems. Specifically, the school reform is proceeding disastrously, primary edu-

cation is being reduced, the curricula in the primary grades are being overloaded, and so on. What is more, this muddy wave is beginning to lap at the door of the preschool, because the primary school has been unable to sustain the burden and is beginning to dump its tasks on the preschool and kindergarten. Play, dancing, singing—those can be presented to dunces; we must encourage children to learn to read, and to count, and thus make them ready for school. The unwilling ideologues of this business have been you, El'konin and Gal'perin, and others; and as soon as people object, you hear that age characteristics mean nothing, and if you teach correctly, a child can learn anything at all.

For me it simply became a vital necessity to escape from this pressure and to somehow shield the unfortunate child, that is, to protect development against learning, and to stress on all fronts the specificity of age-related characteristics. Qualities, properties characteristic of a particular developmental stage must be developed, but it is extremely dangerous and inexpedient to force development and to drag the child up to higher and later stages. All kinds of misfortunes ensue from this. This may be picayune stuff, but it is picayune stuff that acquires nationwide significance, and all in all it indicates that some questions have not been theoretically worked out. I think there is a theoretical aspect to the problem.

Let me say two more things. Perhaps we really do need to go back to stages of development, and to pursue more energetically our research in this area (Daniil Borosovich [El'konin] tried to do this from time to time) in order to shift emphasis in certain things—perhaps, once again, at the expense of an activity at some new stage, clarifying its orienting basis and its specificity, in relation not to psychological results that may or may not be achieved (the range of variations here is very great), but from the standpoint of those methods, those forms of activity, that enable a child to master these things. That is number one.

Second, I, too, shall only point out a few things, although I do have certain arguments I could present. It seems to me that it is necessary, in speaking of the ontogenetic development of activity, and, accordingly, of the mind, to look at a question that we have neglected for a long time and in regard to which we generally limit ourselves to only negative comments; this is mainly the relationship between development and maturation. An important achievement was to establish that maturation is not a driving factor of development, that it is a condition, a free condition, and so forth. Nonetheless, *conditions are not nothing*, especially

as the uniqueness of the child's individual development, as Vygotsky always stressed, lies in the fact that it takes place as these organic conditions are constantly changing, [and becomes] something that has never been before in the historical development of the mind or in the individual development of the mind of the adult.

Of course, the attempts of [Karl] Bühler and others to derive the emergence of certain functions directly from the maturation of the brain now seem absurd and very naive; but perhaps we should take a look at what organic possibilities are opened at each stage in maturation. I attempted once to develop this idea in one of my talks at a session of the Academy. It seems to me that this organic aspect of the matter should be taken into account with respect not only to individual development but also as a characteristic of activity in general.

