

D.A. LEONTIEV

## Guest Editor's Introduction

The name Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontiev (1903–1979), one of the leaders, if not the leader, of Soviet psychology from the 1950s through the 1970s, is very well known and highly appreciated in many countries, especially in continental Europe. However, in the United States his works have never attracted much attention, despite numerous translations. The barriers that have prevented the dissemination of his ideas do not seem to me to be geographical or political, but rather of a linguistic and cultural nature. His theoretical concepts, and the whole spirit of his teachings, stem from classical German philosophy, especially Hegel and Marx. Leontiev's texts meet with multiple problems regarding their translations in English; specifically, they have been translated in different ways, often erroneously, where the translation was formally correct but misleading. Meaning is acquired within some context, and the context for Russian, European, and American readers has remained different, especially from the 1960s through the 1990s. Mikhail Bakhtin noted that whatever does not answer our questions has no meaning for us. Until now, Leontiev's ideas are largely misunderstood, or, more exactly, are hardly understood by American scholars, with few exceptions.

However, the intellectual framework of any culture, together with the questions arising within this framework, keeps changing. And the ideas that seemed marginal and hardly relevant may acquire a new meaning within a new context. One example of such a dynamic is the history of

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the idea of cultural determination of the mind. Within mainstream American psychology from the 1940s to the 1960s (e.g., behaviorism, cognitive psychology, psychoanalysis, humanistic psychology, etc.), society and culture appeared as something alien to the individual person. One has either to struggle with sociocultural pressures or to adjust to them. L.S. Vygotsky's name was hardly known during this period of time; however, during the 1970s, after the efforts of a brilliant generation of cultural anthropologists, including Margaret Mead, Ruth Benedict, Clyde Kluckhohn, and others, American psychology discovered that the cultural environment is the basis of personality construction and development. At this point, Vygotsky's interiorization theory turned out to be highly relevant, like the nearly forgotten theory of George Herbert Mead. New questions emerged with answers that can be found in Vygotsky's and Mead's manuscripts.

Analogously, the concept of personal meaning (or personal sense), central to Leontiev's theory—which he elaborated on more than was done in other psychological theories (see Leontiev 1991, 1996)—was irrelevant for mainstream psychology for decades. However, since 2000, an increased interest in this concept can be observed in mainstream psychology, comparable to the growth of interest in the concept of interiorization (internalization) during the 1970s.

The current issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* presents a new attempt to offer parts of A.N. Leontiev's heritage for English-speaking readers. Hopefully, this attempt will be relevant and will answer questions readers have had. However, it is not only the context of the understanding of Leontiev's ideas that should be changed: Leontiev lived a long life, publishing as much during the second half of his life as he wished, but he was also highly demanding of himself, and spent much time on his texts, sometimes leaving a half-written paper unfinished. His archives are huge, and to date have not yet been fully organized or completely analyzed. Ever since he died, his family has constantly worked on the archives, publishing the most important texts. To date, the number of A.N. Leontiev's posthumous publications is comparable to the number of works published during his lifetime, and this work is far from being finished.

This issue is composed of texts Leontiev never published himself, and most of them were taken from the volume of his early writings, recently published by A.A. Leontiev, D.A. Leontiev, and E. Sokolova

(Leontiev 2003), as well as from the book version of his audiotaped course of lectures read during the mid-1970s, edited by D. Leontiev and E. Sokolova (Leontiev 2000). Some journal articles are also included. These posthumous publications create rather new and unexpected views of Leontiev, containing much new information for all, including those who are well versed in his published works.

In this introduction I do not need to write about the milestones of A.N. Leontiev's life and academic career, because a large section of A.A. Leontiev's book on his father is included. This book was written as a part of a larger book on A.N. Leontiev that includes biographical materials, theoretical analysis, and personal reminiscences of colleagues and friends (Leontiev, Leontiev, and Sokolova, in press). An early version of the first part was published in 2003, as a separate preprint edition.

It is of great sadness that my father, Aleksei A. Leontiev, will not see the final version of that book, as well as this issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*, which was essentially initiated and composed by him. His sudden death on August 12, 2004, has left a large community of A.N. Leontiev's followers without the stable and unquestioned center of authority and focus that he offered for so many years.

This issue covers two periods of A.N. Leontiev's writings, divided by several decades: 1932–40 and 1972–78. In the first period, Leontiev went beyond his position as Vygotsky's gifted assistant by creating a new version of Vygotsky's cultural-historical paradigm, called "activity theory." Discussions continue, both in the Russian and Western contexts, as to whether activity theory is a development and continuation of Vygotsky's cultural-historical approach or an alternative to it. In a recent paper (Leontiev 2002), I attempted to demonstrate that Leontiev's theory does not contradict any important aspects of Vygotsky's approach. Leontiev put forward aspects that Vygotsky did not pay special attention to or even neglected, without devaluing any substantial aspects of Vygotsky's ideas. Mediation, signs, interiorization, the role of social relations within personality development, self-mastery, the meaning-sense dichotomy, relations between education and development, zone of proximal development, age-related crises, systems structure of mind, and many other theoretical ideas of Vygotsky have been completely assimilated by Leontiev.

The focus, however, was different for him. It was life, human ontology, and the concept of activity, which represented for him primarily the

process of linking human beings to the world. Some of Leontiev's theoretical developments make explicit what was implicitly contained in Vygotsky's ideas as a potentiality for further development. For example, it was shown that the boundary between "the inner" and "the outer" processes does not really exist, which is one of the most important and complicated aspects of Leontiev's activity concept. What is rarely understood is that activity is an "inner" as much as an "outer" process, transcending the entire dichotomy. In developing Vygotsky's idea of *interiorization*, Leontiev showed that inner, so-called mental processes (e.g., perception, thinking, and attention, etc.), originating from the outer processes, maintain—in a condensed and reduced form—the structure of activity, similar to that of practical activity in the world. The flexibility of the boundary between the human individual and the world, the inner and the outer, thanks to human activity bridging both sides, is the key feature of the so-called nonclassical psychology (see Leontiev, in press). Therefore, the differences in Leontiev's and Vygotsky's accounts, which became known around 1933–34, never took the form of a real contradiction. They were just two diverging, rather than confronting, scripts for the development of the shared paradigm (cf. A.A. Leontiev and D.A. Leontiev). Leontiev's activity version was successfully developed during many decades, not only by Leontiev himself but also by his numerous followers; Vygotsky's version, based on the concept of communication, has not been elaborated as much. However, everything that Vygotsky accomplished during his lifetime lived in the works of Leontiev and his school of activity theory, long before it received appreciation worldwide.

Among the early papers published in this issue, one on arithmetical thinking represents Leontiev's work within Vygotsky's theoretical framework, with only an initial attempt at original theorizing; the others reflect the period of systematization of the fundamentals of the activity theory approach. Note that in the period after the official condemnation of Vygotsky's ideas, Leontiev overtly praised Vygotsky's contribution, in the paper on the problem of intelligence and education, and especially in the paper on Vygotsky's concept of environment, which was officially devoted to the criticism of Vygotsky!

The works of the last period of Leontiev's life include selected lectures from his general psychology course (namely, the lectures on consciousness, thinking, and speech), and one "home" lecture on "will," given in 1978 to his grandson, myself—when I was a first-year psy-

chology student—which has been audiotaped and published posthumously. It is not possible here to give extended comments on these lectures; however, it will be interesting for the reader to compare the ideas of the mature Leontiev to his earlier thoughts on the same topics.\*

Certainly, the content of this issue does not represent the whole system of A.N. Leontiev's thought. Very many important aspects remain outside the realm of this publication, for instance, Leontiev's theory of personality and motivation. However, I hope that this publication will invite readers to a new level of discovery of A.N. Leontiev's theoretical heritage and will offer some fresh answers to the questions of present-day psychology.

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\*Selected lectures and the lecture on "Will" will be published in July–August 2005 (43/4) and September–October 2005 (43/5) issues of this journal.

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