

Developmental Psychology in the Soviet Union



Jaan Valsiner

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Preface

This book is written with the hope that it might help the reader to understand the complex of reasons that have made developmental ideas prominent in Soviet psychology. The project of writing the present book began at first with the idea of overviewing the most recent developmental work published in USSR and difficult to access internationally. However, it soon became clear to me that such a survey of the present Soviet research would be of limited use, unless the history of Soviet developmental psychology is analyzed in parallel with it. Scientific knowledge does not develop by way of a simple aggregation of new empirical data on top of the old ones. Instead, breakthroughs in any science emerge as a result of new ideas (or, sometimes, technological innovations) that shatter the world view of the scientists and force them to reorganize their theoretical views of the phenomena that they study, and to re-evaluate the existing data. Development of Soviet psychology in the context of Soviet society constitutes a case history of such qualitative reorganization of a scientific discipline. In order to understand the process of this reorganization, its process should be traced in detail. Hence the concentration of the present book on two historical periods in the Soviet psychology—the 1920s and the 1970s–1980s.

The process of work on the present book can be described as that of a detective who is trying to reconstruct the picture of the whole story from scanty bits and pieces of (often limited) evidence. A number of people were helpful in the course of preparing the manuscript. First, I am grateful to George Butterworth whose suggestion to undertake the job of writing this book led me to thinking about the interdependence of science and society in the case of Soviet developmental psychology. Many colleagues and friends helped me to locate and obtain various original publications by Russian and Soviet psychologists, so that a multi-faceted picture of the history of developmental ideas in Soviet psychology could be

assembled. They also provided valuable advice in organizing the scanty and often incomplete materials. For all that assistance, I remain indebted to Jüri Allik, Valentina Ivanova, Toomas Niit, Lloyd H. Strickland, Peeter Tulviste, Ina C. Uzgiris, René Van der Veer and Nadia Zilper. Ann Renninger, Julie Robinson and Thomas Kindermann gave their valuable comments and suggestions after reading various drafts of some of the chapters, and René Van der Veer kindly looked through the final version of the whole manuscript and helped to make final corrections. In addition I am grateful to Professor J. L. Black for permission to quote from his book on Russian education. The editorial staff of Harvester Press was very helpful in scheduling the work on the production of the book. I am very grateful to everybody who assisted me in the process of working on this book.

Jaan Valsiner
Chapel Hill, North Carolina
July, 1987

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Tables</i>	vii
<i>Preface</i>	ix

I	Introduction: Understanding of Development and its Social-Historical Context	1
	Soviet psychology: why is it of interest?	3
	Science and society: a general outline of their shared history	6
	Constraints on the understanding of development	13
	Summary: the relevance, and difficulty of learning about Soviet developmental psychology	18
II	The Historical Context: Some Aspects of the Past of Russian Society	20
	Soviet developmental psychology and its historical context	20
	Russian society and empire before 1917	22
	The influence of European natural sciences on Russian thought	30
	Developmental ideas in Russian social thought	34
	Conclusions: Russian cultural history and developmental ideas	38
III	Developmental Ideas and the History of Psychology in Russian/Soviet Society	39
	Evolutionary theory and Russian developmental psychology	40
	Russian neurophysiology and issues of development	48
	The nature of the social change in Soviet society in the 1920s	66
	The history of Soviet psychology in the 1920s	77
	The 'great break' in Soviet social sciences and its mechanism	89
	Soviet society and science, 1930s–1950s	98
	'Pavlovization' of Soviet psychology	110
	Conclusions: ideas of development and the turmoils of history	115
IV	L. S. Vygotsky and Contemporary Developmental Psychology	117
	The cultural-historical beginnings of Vygotsky's role in Soviet psychology	118
	Vygotsky's Marxism, and the study of development	124
	Criticism of psychology's experimental methodologies	125
	The process of internalization	140
	Vygotsky's ideas and Western psychology	150
	Conclusions: Vygotsky and contemporary developmental psychology	165

V	Mikhail Basov and the Structural-dynamic Perspective on Child Development	166
	Basov's life and activities	168
	Basov's theoretical system	170
	Basov's dynamic structuralism	188
	Methodological integration: retrospective unity of extro- and introspection	203
	Summary: Basov's relevance in developmental psychology	204
VI	Studies on the Development of Children's Action, Cognition, and Perception	207
	The 'Kharkov school' and research on cognitive development	208
	Piagetian studies and Soviet cognitive-developmental psychology	222
	Moral cognition and personality development	223
	Development of speech and its functions in psychological development	227
	Development of visual-motor actions and perception in infancy	229
	A. M. Fonarev's research on infants' visual-orienting reactions	230
	Research on infants' eye movements by A. A. Mir'kin and his colleagues	233
	Summary: interdependence of action, cognition and perception	238
VII	Social Organization of Child Development	240
	Research on social interaction	241
	Studies of interaction in infancy: M. I. Lisina and her laboratory	242
	Social class and child development in Soviet psychology	252
	Social formation of children's world views	253
	Individuals in collectives: social groups, their environments, and social development of children	266
	Social class, child development, and its environment	278
	Conclusions: lessons from Soviet research on social development	282
VIII	Cultural Contexts of Child Development and Psychological Research	284
	The <i>natsmen</i> problem and psychological research in the 1920s	285
	Paedological expeditions of 1929	287
	'Cultural-historical' expeditions to Central Asia	294
	Extinction of psychological research on <i>natsmen</i> child development	298
	Re-emergence of comparative-cultural research in the 1970s	299
	Conclusions	307
IX	Cultural Heterogeneity of Developmental Psychology in the Soviet Union	309
	Why is psychology in the USSR seen as homogeneous?	309
	Geographical heterogeneity of developmental psychology in the USSR	313
	Conclusion: developmental psychology in the USSR is geo-culturally heterogeneous	323

X	Conclusions: Development of Developmental Psychology in the USSR	325
	The modernizing function of historical analysis	325
	The developmental nature of Soviet psychology	328
	Heterogeneity of paradigms, and its social regulation	332
	General conclusions: society and the science of development	334
	<i>Bibliography</i>	336
	<i>Appendix A: A Programme for an Interview with Children for the Study of their Social Knowledge</i>	387
	<i>Index</i>	395

List of Figures

V.1	Basov's graphic representation of the simple temporal chain of acts	190
V.2	Basov's graphic representation of the associatively-determined process	191
V.3	Basov's graphic representation of the apperceptively-determined process	194
V.4	Basov's extended graphic representation of the apperceptively-determined process	195
V.5	Transition from the simple temporal chain of acts to the associatively-determined process	197
V.6	Basov's graphic representation of the transition from an associatively-determined state of a process into an apperceptively-determined state	198

List of Tables

IV.1	Citation frequencies of Vygotsky's publications in English-language literature 1969–1984	157
V.1	Distributions of different structural forms observed in play	202
VII.1	Soviet schoolchildren's reasoning about relationships between the USSR and other countries	263

I Introduction: Understanding of Development and its Social-Historical Context

The task of this book—an analysis of how developmental psychology in the USSR has developed and reached its present state—constitutes a case history of the relationships between a science and its cultural-historical framework. The particular science in question is developmental psychology. The cultural framework is that of the Soviet Union. Since no culture can be understood in its static form when a developmental psychologist tries to analyze it, the present book involves an outline of the development of some aspects of Russian society (and later—Soviet society) that were relevant to the emergence and maintenance of Soviet developmental psychology. This explains the historical emphasis that is present all through this book. The contemporary state of affairs in Soviet developmental psychology can be understood best when we take its cultural-historical context into account, and make its structure and development explicit.

This contention of the present author is in effect an application of a core notion in Soviet psychology, introduced by Pavel Blonskii—‘behaviour can be studied only as the history of behaviour’ (see Chapter V)—to the study of Soviet developmental psychology itself. From that perspective, understanding of some sub-field of psychology in any given country is possible only if one studies the history of that sub-field, embedded within the socio-cultural development of that country. Thus, understanding the contemporary state of developmental psychology in the United States would require an analysis of the history of that discipline in conjunction with the cultural development of the USA, along lines similar to those used for Soviet developmental psychology in this book. Needless to say, the cultural-historical approach to the understanding of the *present* state of developmental psychology in *any* country has largely been absent from the minds of child psychologists. This becomes evident when comparisons between developmental psychologies of different countries are made in

psychologists' writings. Such comparisons are usually direct and synchronic—comparing the present state of developmental psychology in one country with that in the other. The results of such comparisons may perhaps reveal some new information about the 'tip of the iceberg'—as the most important aspects of the contemporary state of the psychologies compared remain hidden in the complex webs of the histories of the societies. One of the aims of this book is to resist the temptation to free the contemporary state of Soviet developmental psychology from its social context. Hence the reader should not expect to find a simple overview of contemporary empirical research done by Soviet developmental psychologists in different areas at the present time. Instead, whenever possible, I have attempted to link the ways Soviet developmental psychologists think theoretically and conduct empirical research, with the cultural-historical context of psychology in the Soviet Union. In a number of places in the book that effort made it necessary to provide rather detailed analyses of historical events or situations in the Russian/Soviet society (and philosophy) that constituted the context for developmental psychology. These 'side-trips' are crucial to Western psychologists' understanding of Soviet developmental psychology. Without an explicit analysis of the historical context in which Soviet developmental psychology emerged, and became transformed into its contemporary form, no adequate understanding of its nature is possible.

Historically, the knowledge and understanding of Soviet developmental psychology in the West has generally been limited, with episodic and narrowly thematic occasional upsurges of interest in it. This relates to the other persistent theme in this book—that of inter-cultural communication about developmental psychology. Although some of the major works written by Soviet developmentalists up to the present time are available to the international readership in translation, the majority of ordinary Western child psychologists encounter different problems in understanding psychological writings that originate in the USSR. For example, a state of confusion while reading Soviet psychological papers is frequently experienced by American experimental psychologists who look for 'the data' and their analysis in the conventional statistical form—and have difficulty in finding any. Such difficulty results from the belief that the 'science'

of psychology is the same 'science' everywhere, and that it is 'good science' as long as it conforms to the person's own background professional socialization. A similar communication difficulty emerges in the reverse direction. It is reflected in the impressions of Soviet psychologists who, while reading highly empirical papers in American child psychology journals, are disappointed by the obvious lack of theoretical consistency in the majority of papers published in those journals.

These opposite difficulties in the understanding of Soviet psychology by Westerners, and of Western psychology by their Soviet counterparts, constitute a case of scientific communication where the reasons for mutual misunderstandings can be revealed. In this respect, the present treatise is a narrative in the domain of sociology or social anthropology of a social science. Its goal is to analyze the usually hidden ties between the cultural organization of society and the thinking of psychologists, as well as an overview of developmental psychology in USSR.

Soviet psychology: why is it of interest?

The case of developmental psychology in the USSR seems to be of interest to the international public for a number of different reasons. The first of these is a superficial one—the political history of the world in the past six decades has resulted in increased interest in the Soviet Union. Somehow, the widely known 'journalistic events', such as Russian 'bearhugs' on TV screens when foreign dignitaries arrive in Moscow, or the use of a shoe as a tool in international diplomacy at the United Nations, keep up Westerners' interest in the powerful and hard-to-understand country.

The second reason is the natural interest of psychologists and social scientists outside the USSR in the work of their colleagues in that country. However, these two reasons are interdependent—Western psychologists' interest in the work of their Soviet counterparts may be framed by the political discourse about the USSR that is part of the everyday social environment of Western scientists. A simple test of such socio-political framing of psychologists' interests is to look for books (published in English) devoted to psychology in some countries (e.g., India, Italy, France,

Mexico or the Republic of China) rather than others (the USSR, the People's Republic of China). The interest of English-speaking psychologists in psychologies in these different countries seems to be unevenly distributed and, in a curious way, seems to follow the emphases given to those countries as a whole by the socio-political discourse of the mass media in the USA and European countries.

Thirdly, the interest in Soviet psychology may result from the self-presentation efforts of the Soviet social system to propagate its products. Such advertising efforts often take the form of assertions that the Soviet version of the particular promotion object (e.g., Soviet psychology) is better than its Western counterparts, without providing more information about it. Quite predictably, such advertising can have its effect—its recipients become uncomfortable with the little information available, which results in increased curiosity about the mysteries of Soviet psychology. Fourthly, the actual writings of some psychologists from the Soviet Union have triggered the interest of their Western colleagues in the work by these scientists, as well as by others. Thus, if a psychologist becomes interested in the work of a particular Soviet psychologist, such as Vygotsky, it is likely that this interest disseminates to other sides of psychology in USSR.

Finally, the history and the present state of developmental psychology in the USSR can be viewed as a reflection of the social processes within Soviet society. A person taking this perspective uses the available accounts of psychology in USSR as a means to some more general sociological end. In this respect, a cultural-historical study of Soviet developmental psychology may be used to further our understanding of the intricate texture of the functioning of Soviet society as a whole. Such use of a particular social science in the Soviet Union may be a productive direction for research on Soviet society, since details of the actual organization of that society may emerge from such study with greater clarity than is possible within the usual (i.e. politically oriented) analysis efforts that abound in Western countries.

Whatever combination of reasons lies behind the interests of a particular person in developmental psychology in the USSR, the interested person is confronted with a complicated task. An adequate understanding of Soviet developmental psychology requires integration of information from different sources into a holistic Gestalt. It is not only the input information from Soviet

psychology that guides the formation of that understanding, but, equally importantly, the Western psychologist's view of the world that is the basis of that understanding. In this respect, the Westerner interested in Soviet psychology forms an understanding of it not as it is, but as it is perceived to be from the perspective of his or her own socialized background. The direction given to those perspectives can easily be labelled 'bias' of some kind. However, in the communication process, such 'biases' are omnipresent and unavoidable, since a recipient of communicative messages about Soviet psychology is an active co-constructor of its understanding, rather than a passive and impartial 'gatherer of data'. In that process of co-construction, the psychologist is inevitably guided by his cultural background. That background leads him to assimilate only selected aspects of the new information and to accommodate his existing background knowledge to it (to use Piaget's terminology). It also makes the process of understanding Soviet psychology by a Westerner a lengthy and complicated process, in the course of which the interest (and motivation to proceed) of only a few may survive. In a way, the compositional structure of this book reflects that difficult process. The diligent and motivated reader may find this book interesting after reading it through, whereas readers who may aim to arrive at some quickly obtainable and simple general conclusion about Soviet developmental psychology are likely to be left unsatisfied. The reason for this lies in the complexity of the subject matter—*no* simple and easy conclusive generalizations about Soviet psychology can be made, given the nature of that psychology. Like most of the intellectual and artistic achievements that have originated in Russia (and, later, the Soviet Union), Soviet developmental psychology is a multiple-sided complex whole. Many particular periods of its history are both innovative and trivial at the same time, different developmental psychologists have been both active 'builders of the Soviet society' and equally active critics of some aspects of that society. Frequent Western efforts to reduce the issue of acceptance of Marxist philosophy by Soviet psychology to the 'either/or' form (i.e., *either* they accepted Marxism on their own, *or* were forced to do so against their will by political authorities) are an example of simplification of a view of the polyphonic nature of Soviet psychology. In reality, much of Russian/Soviet psychology is similar in complexity to the classics of Russian literature or music,

which have been greatly appreciated by Westerners over many decades. In this book I will analyze some of the complexity of the theoretical understanding of child development as it has emerged in the web of the Russian culture, especially at the times of rapid change in that culture. However, before that analysis can proceed, the issue of science-society relationships in general needs to be discussed.

Science and society: a general outline of their shared history

The relations between science and society have become a ground for discussion in recent decades, thanks to the diffusion of the philosophical ideas of 'paradigms' (Kuhn, 1962, 1970) and 'research programmes' (Lakatos & Musgrave, 1970) into the thinking and discourse of scientists in many areas, as well as of the interested public. Such wider interest has been further enhanced by Feyerabend's (1975, 1976) criticism of science's orthodox self-reflections.

No one interested in Soviet psychology can avoid having to deal with variable statements, made by authors of different backgrounds, about 'science' and 'the scientific nature' of one or another psychological perspective or empirical research result. Furthermore, s/he is likely to come across statements that negate the 'scientific' status, and assign the label of 'pseudo-science' to some approaches in psychology. For example, many psychological ideas and empirical research practices were labelled using terms of such dubious connotations in the USSR in the 1930s. Likewise, a Western reader may get exhausted after labouring through many pages of semi-philosophical text by a Soviet psychologist, and may end up dismissing it as 'of little value to science'. Some clarification of the terms 'science' and 'scientific' as used in social discourse may help us to keep interested in the real issues of knowledge behind such attributional language use.

Word magic: does calling something 'science' makes it one?

Human beings can create both clarity and confusion through their use of language. Language use makes it possible for us to transcend the immediately available information, and to construct varieties of

knowledge. Usually such construction improves our understanding of the world. Sometimes, however, our language use sets up conditions that make it easy to fuse our thinking and its object world—we may start to consider our reflection on the reality that reality itself.

This philosophical and linguistic-logical feature is analyzed by Michel Foucault (1983) in his treatment of the philosophy of René Magritte's painting *This is not a pipe*. That painting includes a drawing of a pipe, with an inscription in the picture, under the drawing: 'This is not a pipe'. The little game with language use is obvious here—we know all too well that a picture of an object is not a specimen of the objects of the given kind. Furthermore, a linguistic statement *about* an object (or its representation) does not belong to the class of these objects (or their pictorial representations).

Gregory Bateson's analysis of the status of concepts (1971) addresses the same issue. In his example, the general (class) concept 'chair' cannot belong to the class of chairs (that includes a variety of different specimens of particular chairs). One cannot sit on the *concept* 'chair', but one can understand the variety of different chairs, their structure, and properties by operating with that concept in one's mind.

A similar perspective can be taken in respect of the concepts 'science' and 'scientific'. Is a statement 'X is science' one that can belong to the class to which it is referring? Or can a negative statement 'X is not scientific' itself belong to the class of 'scientific' statements? The present author's tentative answer to that question is no. No statement, involving ascriptions of the status of 'science' or 'scientific' to particular theories, methods, data, approaches, etc., can be considered to belong to the class to which it is referring. Such a statement belongs to classes of statements *about* their objects, rather than to the latter. So any statement concerning one or another approach in psychology that claims that the particular approach is, or is not, part of psychology, is not part of psychology itself, but constitutes a part of meta-level discourse about psychology. Such a statement may belong to the class of 'social-political statements about psychology' or, more simply, to the class of 'psychologists' gossip' or their 'boundary maintenance' of the discipline. It may affect what the psychologists do, and how they think, in dramatic ways, but nevertheless that statement does not