



The sense and the meaning of cultural-historical theory of L. S. Vygotsky

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Abstract

L. S. Vygotsky's principal idea, lying in the base of cultural-historical theory, is the primacy of sense over meaning. There are serious reasons to believe that this part of cultural-historical theory was not completely understood both by his disciples and his opponents. That's why many Vygotsky's conclusions and discoveries remained untapped. While others were implemented in science and practice quite differently from what he suggested.

Vygotsky once wrote that features of the particular science deeply related to its method. That's why he introduced the experimental-genetic method (projective method in modern psychology), which allows modeling the processes of development.

One of the basic concepts of cultural-historical theory is the concept of "cultural development". A Cultural person, for Vygotsky, is the person, who can control not only their own behavior and actions but also their own psychic processes. On the one hand, modern psychology doesn't deny the role of volition in child's development. But on the other hand, the volition itself is typically understood as one's ability to submit to laws and rules. More than that – it's rather easy to create conditions where a person will submit to laws and rules, but it doesn't develop his ability to control himself.

In Vygotsky's opinion, there are natural psychic functions, which in the process of learning transform into cultural ones. In this context, the main goal of learning is to create conditions for developing person's ability to be the subject of his own behavior, activity and psychic.

Keywords : Cultural-historical theory; L. S. Vygotsky; Volition.

The ideas of L. S. Vygotsky, on the one hand, are very popular and in demand all over the world. Lately they have often mentioned and written about the unified school of L. S. Vygotsky, A. N. Leontiev and A. R. Luria. However, on the other hand, it seems that many of the ideas and thoughts of the author of the cultural-historical approach were not only, not developed by his students and followers, but left out of modern psychology as well.

To illustrate the above-said we can use some ideas concerning the relation between the meaning and the sense. One of the fundamental ideas of L. S. Vygotsky, which formed the basis of cultural-historical psychology, was the idea of the primacy of the sense in relation to the meaning.

In contrast to L. S. Vygotsky, A. N. Leontiev in his work insists on the primacy of the meaning in relation to the sense. This very understanding of the relation between the meaning and the sense has had a significant impact on the construction of the process of learning, understanding of the nature of development, finally, on the interpretation of the main concepts of cultural-historical psychology. This article will focus on the values that are attributed to cultural-historical psychology today, and those meanings that were left out.

The difference of these positions is clearly visible in the analysis of the concept of socialization. According to Leontiev's position where the meaning comes first, socialization is a gradual assimilation of different social norms and the construction of one's behavior in accordance with them. Antisocial behavior from this point of view is characterized by the actions which are against a certain society. These include different types of deviant behavior, and original, unusual and uncommon human reaction in different situations. For example, the researchers of creative people's behavior point out that an unusual and in some cases even anti-social behavior and actions are quite common among those individuals. In contrast, law-abiding citizens behave in a traditional way that can be characterized as social. Thus, the recognition of the primacy of meanings leads to the understanding of the process of socialization as a process of internalization in the sphere of social relations.

The position of L. S. Vygotsky about the primacy of the sense is realized in his observation that the baby initially is the most social creature. The idea that a baby is the most social creature, in fact, questioned the very idea of sociality. In this case, it becomes unclear what exactly is being socialized and what is the result of this process. If we consider the term "the most social creature" according to the general logic of cultural-historical concept, it becomes obvious that the "sociality" of the baby is determined by the position of "pro-we" in which an adult is superior to it. The activities of the adult together with the baby accompanied by a speech such as "we go" or "we cook porridge" from the very beginning make the child an active participant in adult life. We can say that, in some ways, already in the womb the child is a participant of the events involving his mother. A baby is a social creature because of the immediate proximity to adults, first of all to the mother.

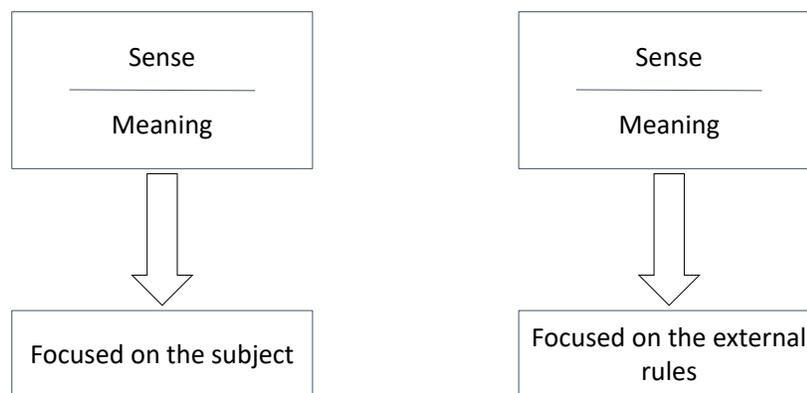
If we analyze what happens to sociality as a child grows up, the most general answer to this question will be that sociality becomes absolutely different. If newborn's sociality

is something taken for granted, then as children grow up and develop, they also acquire sociality of a higher level and quality.

Thus, socialization in cultural-historical concept has as its basis the unity between the child and the adult, which Vygotsky referred to as "pro-we". But further sociality is connected with the ability of a child to emancipate and differentiate from the adult.

It means that **the child does not transform the external in the internal, doesn't adapt to external requirements but tries to confront the society in different ways.** Only in this case we can speak about the formation of authentic sociality. Only in this way children acquire a real sociality, antecedent forms which were given to them initially. This is the only way children become the subject of their activities, mind and life.

Socialization



Thus, the recognition of the primacy of sense in relation to the meanings allows us to consider socialization as a process focused not on external rules and circumstances, but on the subject. A subject consistently masters mental functions and processes, primarily through the opposition to the society in relationship with other people. But sociality is as well linked to the ability of the subject to reflect and rethink about problem situations and is manifested in the means by which he or she becomes the subject of his or her psyche.

In the texts of L. S. Vygotsky, you can find the answer to the question, how a person becomes social and what gives the formation and development of arbitrariness. According to the author of cultural-historical psychology, it is a function of **imagination**.

Imagination was and still is clearly underestimated by psychologists. This is due to methodological and methodological difficulty of the study. In addition, insufficient knowledge of the imagination in comparison with other mental processes and functions is

connected to misunderstanding or failure to accept that the meanings are derived from the sense.

The processes of socialization and formation of arbitrariness, according to L. S. Vygotsky, are provided by the imagination. First, imagination provides the creation of an imaginary situation by a child in which he or she is always the subject of their own activities. In the imaginary situation, the child can do anything: they can perform adult activities, they can assess certain circumstances differently (A Witch is not wicked and terrible but old and sick), they can finally change themselves (in the imaginary situation I am not afraid, I'm not in pain, etc.).

Second, the imagination contributes to the formation and development of self-consciousness ("I"). In the process of development of the imagination a child has the power to oppose an adult or to act together consciously.

Third, imagination provides children not only with the ability to differentiate oneself from the surrounding world, but also helps to open a world of other people (society). If before the crisis of three years a child differentiated between "his or her" and "other people", however, they were perceived quite vaguely. A child built relationship (or avoided to build relationship) with someone specific (my grandmother or a stranger). Now he or she is able to communicate with different people, consciously realizing, thus, different relationships (you can beg a mother, but it's better not to argue with dad). In addition, social norms open to a child: it is good and it's bad, it is possible, it is not.

All this (the creation of imaginary situations, the consciousness of "I can do it by myself", the ability to identify and understand a certain society) provides a child with **self-realization**. Thus, his sociality suggests that a genuine entry into the society is possible only in the case when in the process of socialization, the subject is not subordinate to someone or something, and submits the external circumstances through their thinking and rethinking. So, a child who is eating slowly will not compete with an adult to be the fastest eater, he or she will say that the slowest one wins. Or, for example, Mark TWAIN's character, Tom Sawyer, who was forced to paint the fence as a punishment, managed to turn a boring thing into a very interesting and attractive activity.

The concept of socialization in relation to an individual means the entrance of the individual into society, the construction of behavior and activity of the individual in accordance with the laws and norms of a society. In some ways, it is possible to force the individual to learn the norms of society and to implement **adaptive behavior**. Unfortunately, this is the basis of a fairly large number of modern educational systems which implement the principle of A. N. Leontiev.

However, as experience shows, in this case, when there is no control, his or her socialization vanishes and he or she begins to misbehave. A striking example of this is not necessarily some crime but a very common phenomenon, when the class is quiet as long as the teacher is inside the classroom. The same happens in summer camps when the leader leaves the bedroom. In these and many similar cases, the subject manifests a socialized

Behavior



behavior, not being the subject of this behavior. A real subject of this behavior is the society represented in the group of specific adults who according to their social role or their personal qualities set the social norm and cause other people to regulate their behavior in accordance with it.

If the subject has no experience in building their own social norms, someone else's one is not perceived as a norm as well and is considered to be a personal characteristic of a person. No wonder such statements of pupils can be heard: "I decided for her", etc. For example, once assessing children's psychological readiness to school education, I asked them to check which rope is longer. This task proved to be very difficult. The majority of children, hiding their hands behind their back, tried to determine the length of the ropes by eye. When they were given a hint that the rope can be measured, one boy said: "But why didn't you say that we need to measure it for you".

In the socialization through self-realization, a child gets the opportunity from to feel like a full member of society and not just a small "screw" in a complex system of social hierarchy. In this case, the process of socialization is the same and not opposed to the process of personality development in ontogenesis, because as L. S. Vygotsky pointed out, the subject acts personal when he or she feels as a source of their own actions and behavior.

So, if you take L. S. Vygotsky's position of about the primacy of sense in relation to the meaning it is necessary to create the conditions for purposeful development of imagination, which provides interpretation and reinterpretation, which in turn leads to mastery of themselves, their behavior, activity, psyche.

Moreover, the recognition of the primacy of the sense, allows us to return once more to the understanding of the meaning of learning in cultural-historical psychology. If you

focus on the sense for those who study, then learning becomes a process centered on the student. Not a teacher, not a program, not exams, only the one who learns. On the one hand, the call to make the student the center of teaching process is not new. However, on the other hand, because studying is dominated by the idea of the primacy of meanings, the student is certainly not in the center, and studying becomes something remote and vague.

If one of the most famous ideas of L. S. Vygotsky that learning leads development, is considered from the point of view of relationship between the sense and meaning, then it gives the key to understanding of the learning process itself and its results as well.

Firstly, training in the framework of cultural-historical theory is something of an individual nature, as the sense is individual. For example, good teachers know that if certain methods and techniques of teaching the child are not successful, it is enough to change them in the right direction to change student's attitude to learning and, consequently, learning results as well.

Secondly, teaching in the understanding of the author's cultural-historical concept cannot be not educational. Any teaching, according to Vygotsky, develops, otherwise it is not teaching, but training at best.

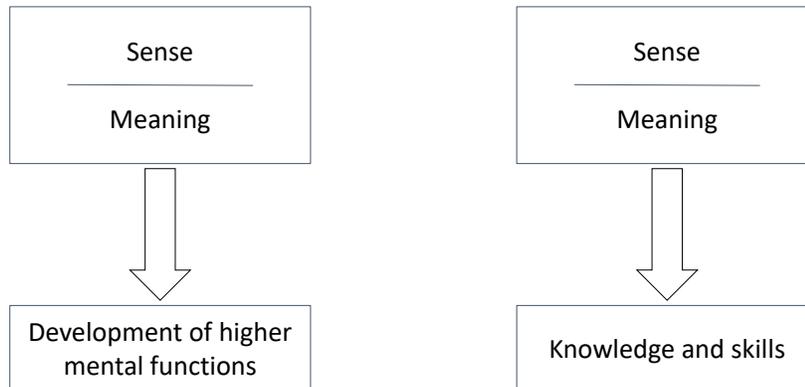
Thirdly, teaching oriented to the sense is continuous. In modern science and practice based on meanings, continuous education is usually associated with learning at different age stages. In cultural-historical the importance of human learning at different ages is not underestimated, but learning which is closely connected with life itself is considered to be the most important. In other words, focus on the sense, suggests that learning is not confined only to special classes or lessons, but included in all the processes of life.

Fourthly, Vygotsky thinks that the results of studying are not connected with the meanings that are easy to measure using knowledge and skills, but with the formation and development of higher mental functions. In other words, the effectiveness of teaching and learning is associated with developing the student's ability to master their own behavior, activity, mental processes and functions.

The difference in approaches to learning based on the sense or the meaning is clearly visible in the analysis of concepts, which, in many respects, became the trademark of the cultural-historical theory – the concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD).

This concept is discussed in *Learning and mental development at school age*, published in 1935. Talking about strategies to build learning process, Vygotsky distinguishes two levels of child development – relevant, which is characterized by the fact what the child can do alone, and the zone of proximal development. However, he notices that the contents of the zone of proximal development can be characterized by the tasks that a child cannot solve independently, but can do it with the help of an adult. Very important, from our point of view, is Vygotsky's idea that what a child is doing with the help of an adult today, tomorrow he or she will be able to do by themselves.

Results of studying



If we consider this idea of L. S. Vygotsky in the general logic of cultural-historical approach, then, firstly, it turns out that for Vygotsky learning is, first and foremost, communication. In other words, the concept of the zone of proximal development is Vygotsky formula and model of his understanding of the mechanisms of mental development in ontogenesis.

There is a certain current level of development, which is usual for a person. Through communication and with the help of communication with other people, he or she can rise to a higher level.

In addition, secondly, the concept of the zone of proximal development enables us to justify the importance and necessity of education cooperation. The implementation of the pedagogy of cooperation involves understanding that there is no clearly expressed position of the organizer of process oriented to the meaning; there is no confrontation between a teacher and students, but there is an educational team, including teachers, aimed at a solution of a problem together or performing a learning task.

All the studies of the zone of proximal development can be divided into two groups. The authors, who can be attributed to the first group, investigated the peculiarities of hints in learning. If a child is unable to solve the problem, one can give them a hint and if he or she now solves the problem, then it will be teaching and learning focused on a zone of proximal development.

Even a superficial analysis of this approach shows its inadequacy. Educators and psychologists know well that, for example, one clue leads to the solution of the problem, while the other does not change anything in the behavior and activities of the child. However, neither the solution of the problem using the hint nor the prompt itself clarifies

anything in the understanding and practical application of the concept of the zone of proximal development. A child may not solve the problem with a hint because he or she has problems with communication or because he or she doesn't understand something that an adult suggests doing. The same thing happens with the child who solves the problem using a hint, but cannot solve a similar problem independently.

The studies, which can be roughly classified to the second group as a rule, are devoted to the construction of developmental education in the traditional sense. Developmental education is considered to be an education focused on the zone of proximal development. However, L. S. Vygotsky zone of proximal development is a measure of **individual** development. In addition, according to L. S. Vygotsky, ZPD, as well as actual development has already formed, developed in the child. Thus, teaching focused on the zone of proximal development turns potential development (personal ZPD) into the actual development and nothing more at best.

Despite the difference in these two approaches it can be concluded that the authors, exploring the features of the prompts and the scientists who construct the learning process focused on the zone of proximal development, adhere to the theoretical and methodological setup according to which the meaning is of primary importance in the processes of development.

There is reason to make some conclusion that the zone of proximal development characterizes a certain space, one boundary of which is closest to the actual development of the child, while the other, is the most distant from the actual development. This means that, on the one hand, the zone of proximal development can be measured, and, on the other hand, that the focus on the zone of proximal development involves different ways of cooperation of teachers with students and students among themselves.

There are experimental studies indicating that the assistance provided to the child in solving problems that they cannot solve on their own, can "be measured" in accordance with the position of the communication. For example, with minimal assistance, the position is "independent". A little more help is given in the implementation of a position "equal", more help involves such positions as "superior" and "sub". Finally, the maximum help is provided when an adult occupies the position of "pro-we". Thus, it appears that we can distinguish 5 levels of the zone of proximal development. When the position is independent, as we already stated, the help was the minimum and this means that the content of the zone of proximal development is as close as possible to actual child's development. Next, there are levels of development- equal, superior, sub, and pro. If a child cannot solve the problem with assistance from the position of "pro-we", this means that this content is outside the zone of his proximal development.

Thus, the same content can be close to actual development for children of the same age, while outside the zone of their proximal development for others. There is experimental data that suggest that in addition to the zone of proximal development, there is the zone of distant development. It can't be reached by a subject even in collaborative activities (with

external support), but in many ways, it determines the individual aspects of the zone of proximal development.

The zone of distant development is formed (constructed) in the process of immersion of the subject in a certain environment, or an environment with specific content. A small child who finds himself or herself in speech environment earlier than his or her peers will start to understand the speech and speak. For example, a child whose close adults talk to a lot begins to speak before his peers who, for whatever reasons, are deprived of such a communication.

A child who watches an adult writing letters or reading them, is more psychologically ready to master the written language. In other words, his or her personal ZPD related to the written language is more developed, its boundaries are wider.

The recognition of the importance of the concept of the zone of distant development means that the problems of personal ZPD should be resolved by creating a special environment for its formation and by the ability of the subject to "plunge" into the environment.

The features of such environment and conditions of immersion of the subject in it are largely a subject of future research. However, there are some assumptions about the facts how such an environment should be constructed.

Let's take two examples: there are immigrants who have lived in America for about 20 years, who speak English sometimes even worse than when they first arrived in this country. Here is the presence of the language environment, but the complete lack of its influence on the development of linguistic competence among people of different age. Another example, a teenager, enamored of German cartoons, who has learned German watching them. Here there is the presence of the language environment too though not as active and rich as in life in an German speaking country. However, even not such a rich and active environment led to significant linguistic development of the adolescent.

The explanations such as the fact that the teenager had a motivation to learn the language, and the immigrants did not, doesn't work in the framework of cultural-historical psychology. In addition, there is a serious doubt that a teenager had a strong motivation to learn German.

If you analyze both of these examples in the context of the cultural-historical approach, it becomes clear that in one case there was proper communication, and in the other - there was not. Indeed, the immigrants who have not learned to speak English, either communicate only within their own family, or with the the same people as they are, not speaking English immigrants. With whom did the teenager communicate while watching cartoons? Well, it could be the characters of the cartoon, its creators, one of the characters, etc. The proof that it was certainly communication is the boy's focus on the **context** that determines the presence or absence of common semantic field.

So, environment is a communion, where the subject is focused on the context: phrases, actions, dialogue. However, the developmental nature of this environment is achieved only if there is a will effort by a subject. This way, a teenager, who didn't understand any German, had to make an effort to somehow understand the meaning of the words and actions of cartoon characters. He did not just watch the same movie many times, but replayed on the VCR the same piece to understand its content and meaning, and then watched the movie further. By the way, it is this very willpower which many immigrants lack and prefer to spend time in the Russian quarters and, as they say, "not to go to America".

So, on the one hand, it is possible to determine the level of development the zone of proximal development. At the same time, on the other hand, it can be concluded that the characteristics of the zone of proximal development are connected with the characteristics of the zone of distant development.

The features of the zone of distant development are in turn determined by the presence or absence of the environment in which the learner is immersed, and those will efforts, which he or she implements in this environment.

The analysis of the concept of environment in cultural-historical context allows us to conclude that it is directly connected with the culture in which the individual lives and develops. It is real people who surround the subject, as well as all ideal partners, including the ones who lived many years ago, who worked and created this area of knowledge. However, the environment itself does not create a zone of distant development. The subject has to experience it. For example, immigrants have no problems with foreign-language environment, but some of them struggle to avoid it. As the immersion in this environment requires certain will efforts.

In the texts of Vygotsky there is nothing about what the assistance of an adult should be aimed at, when the child cannot independently perform a task. It was found that the assistance in the zone of proximal development can be different – one helping the subject to cope with the content of a task and the other helping to accept the outside help. So, outside help can be directed to different aspects of the development of the individual - one directly connected with the contents, while the other is connected with communication and interaction with other people. Each of the allocated types of help solves a particular problem – "object" one to use different types of knowledge, skills, abilities, etc. in solving specific problems. Another one, "communicational", helps the subject to accept outside help in the case when the subject has problems with its adoption.

To illustrate this, we use an example of A. Bronfenbrenner, who said that different family members differently build their relations with the child, for example, dad may prove to be "together" with a child – he plays with him or her, spoils, can forget that it's dinner time, when a mother is "superior" to the child. She's kind of an example and model of correct social behavior.

So, if the subject cannot accept outside help and use it to solve the task, then, is quite a fair conclusion that this content, which substantial assistance is directed at, is outside of

the zone of proximal development. If he or she can use communication to solve something or to fulfill, that content will be inside the zone of his proximal development.

In other words, the assistance in taking the hint and doing the task, which the subject cannot do, provides a transition from the distant into proximal development, or change the boundaries of the zone of proximal development.

For example, a child cannot solve a problem. An adult, first from the independent position, then increasing the help, tries to help him or her, but the kid never solves the problem. This means that the content of this problem or the ways to solve it are outside the zone of proximal development for the child. Now add another adult or older or more advanced child who, for example, asks: "What's wrong here?" - and begins to help the first child to understand and accept what the adult offers. He or she can do it in different ways, for example, they begin to do something wrong deliberately and sometimes it is enough for the first child to solve the problem. It may be different. The second adult or a peer begins to do something together with the child, realizing the outside help this way. And again, the task that had previously been outside the zone of proximal development now moves inside the zone. Thus, there has been a change of the boundaries of the zone of proximal development. It has changed due to the increase and penetration of the zone of distant development.

This allows us to draw an important practical conclusion. An authentic educational teaching should focus on the zone of distant development. In this context, the more effective is multi-level, mixed-age learning. As a rule, the second and especially the third child in the family begins to walk and talk early, solves any problem. All this is due to the fact that they are immersed in an environment where someone is superior to them. At the same time, as a rule, nothing is required from them. Once we met two brothers, one of whom was at school and had homework to do (reading), and the other one played "school" next to him. It turned out that the second brother learned to read much faster and better than the older one.

It is important to emphasize that this education is more time-consuming to organize, but it allows to implement individualized instruction and to focus on the personal sense of each participant.

Last thing I wanted to stay in this article relates to the learning results oriented to the sense. According to the ideas of L. S. Vygotsky, such learning because of its educational nature, should lead to changes in consciousness. In general, according to Vygotsky, it is consciousness that should be the subject of the new psychology that he offered.

In modern psychology, different authors described three periods in which there is a qualitative change in consciousness. In any case, not claiming that there are only three such periods, we will try to analyze their common features. So, first of all, primary school age, when children begin to focus on letters and numbers and are willing to voluntarily give their will to the teacher. Then a senior adolescence, when yesterday's children begin

to exhibit the traits and characteristics of adult behavior. Finally, it is adolescence or early adulthood, when professional consciousness appears.

These different, not even related to each other periods of children's ontogenesis, in which qualitative changes in consciousness happen, are similar in activities which were previous to this change. So, children who have the consciousness of the primary school pupil played "school" with pleasure before that. Teens play adults and adulthood for a long time. Finally, boys and girls, just entering adulthood, are able to implement professional consciousness, for example, medical students: they find signs of those diseases that they study when their relatives or friends are ill. This is also a kind of a game, but the game "profession".

The connection of the game and changes in the consciousness is easily explained by the understanding of the game, which can be found in the texts of L. S. Vygotsky. Thus, he notes that when playing "hospital" a child» cries as a patient, and at the same time, is happy as a player. This means that in the game the child (adult) simultaneously implements two positions – the position within the game (the patient) and a position outside the game (player). As it was shown by studies in recent years, these two positions affect each other's development. In other words, with the position of a "player" a child (adult) implements the position of a "patient". During the game, some features implemented in the role of a "patient", for example, patience, ability to submit to another, etc. affect the personal characteristics of the child. He or she learns to be more patient, behaves and acts as it is required by the rules of the game.

Thus, the game that accompanies people's learning process throughout their life, ensures that some of the characteristics, properties, and meanings of human relations and problematic situations become the content of their consciousness. And to realize something, according to L. S. Vygotsky, is to master it.

This allows us to make several important conclusions. First, there is a point of view according to which there is some gap between playing and learning. However, if you build a student-centered teaching, learning, during which changes occur in the mind, it is impossible to do without a game.

Secondly, contrary to another common point of view that playing is only children's activity, in cultural-historical psychology playing is not limited to the preschool period of development, and accompanies people all their life.

Thirdly, the nature of the game allows, on the one hand, to identify specific, personal problems, and, on the other hand, allows you to use it to overcome a significant number of difficulties.

So, if following L. S. Vygotsky, we focus on the sense and build teaching and learning process and development of the child and the adult in the logic of cultural-historical theory, it will not be an exaggeration to say that we are just going to understand the ideas of L.

S. Vygotsky and learn how to implement them in practice. As a well-known Russian philosopher V. S., Bibler said, "Go back to Lev Vygotsky".

It's been 82 years since L. S. Vygotsky passed away. What did the author of cultural-historical psychology dream about? The creation of a new psychology, but he not only dreamed, he was also building. He was very worried that he was not fully understood by even his closest students and employees. For example, in the notebooks, he noted that A. N. Leont'ev makes a fatal mistake, taking the whole mentality to activity and its components.

In one of his letters, written in the last days of his life, he compares his fate with that of Moses, who knew that he himself would not see the promised land. According to Vygotsky, only going beyond the methodological limits of the old psychology will allow us to build a new psychology. This new psychology will be able to formulate and solve problems related to personality correctly, because it, unlike the old psychology, knows the cultural development of a child and the genesis of higher mental functions.

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