

THEORETICAL-METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON VYGOTSKY'S LEGACY: AN INTERVIEW WITH PROFESSOR NIKOLAI VERESOV

Ana Caroline Toffanelli ^{1 2}, Orcid: <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8228-9159>
Adriana de Fátima Franco ¹, Orcid: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2727-1367>

REFLEXÕES TEÓRICO-METODOLÓGICAS SOBRE O LEGADO DE VIGOTSKI: ENTREVISTA COM O PROFESSOR NIKOLAI VERESOV

REFLEXIONES TEÓRICO-METODOLÓGICAS SOBRE EL LEGADO DE VYGOTSKY: UNA ENTREVISTA CON PROFESOR NIKOLAI VERESOV

Introduction

Professor Nikolai Veresov gave the following interview on January 14th, 2020, at the Faculty of Education at Monash University (Melbourne - Australia). It was carried out during an International Ph.D. internship period, named 'Sandwich Ph.D.' in Brazil, of one of the authors of this article, being subsidized by the Brazilian Federal Foundation for Support and Evaluation of Graduate Education (CAPES) through Doctoral Sandwich Program Abroad (PDSE). Since 2011, Veresov has been an Associate Professor at that University, standing out as one of the current great researchers in the Cultural- Historical Theory field. Veresov started his academic career in Russia, his birth country, finishing his Masters on Education at the Murmansk Pedagogical Institute in 1982, and his first Ph.D. degree at the Moscow Pedagogic University, in 1990. In 1998, he finished his second Ph.D. at the Oulu University (Finland), launching as its final product the book *Undiscovered Vygotsky*. In this book, the author brings up a historical comprehension of the development of Vygotsky's thinking, highlighting questions that - as the author himself shows at this interview - would stand as not important among the cultural-historical researchers for several years - such as the case of *Perezhivanie* concept.

Thus, this interview aims to bring light to certain aspects of the Cultural-Historical Theory that currently has been gaining prominence in the academic community. Being granted at the same time as the author was launching the English version of Volume 1 of *L. S. Vygotsky's pedagogical works, called Foundations of pedology* (2019), it focuses more firmly on the issues regarding the translation and interpretations of the *Perezhivanie* concept, wrongly translated into English language as experiencing or lived through, as well as the consequences of the unfolding of superficial and fragmented understandings of Vygotsky's legacy. Due to its length and the quality of the material that follows, we have

¹ Universidade Estadual de Maringá, Maringá, Paraná, Brasil.

² Email: caroltoffanelli@gmail.com



chosen to divide it into two parts, with the first part of the interview given in this edition. Finally, we would like to offer the most sincere thanks to Professor Nikolai, both for the kindly granted interview and for the welcome and productive learning provided during the Sandwich Ph.D. period.

Interview

Ana Caroline: Professor Nikolai, I would first like to thank you for giving us this interview. There are no doubts that it will be of great value to all researchers and those interested in the Cultural-Historical field. I would like to start, then, with a very broad question: we currently see researchers addressing themselves as ‘neo-Vygotskyans’ as well as we call in Brazil ‘activity clinic’ based on Leontiev's work is emerging. In your opinion, can we call these researchers as cultural-historical researchers?

Professor Nikolai: Firstly, I am grateful for the opportunity to share some of my ideas with this magazine. I am especially grateful to the editorial staff and Carol Toffanelli, who came here from Brazil, especially to listen to me.

I know a little about the research situation in Brazil because in the last 3-4 years I have visited Brazil a few times and the last time I was in Brazil was last year, in 2019. I spent about a month working with people from different universities, such as the Federal University of Rio Grande do Norte (UFRN), Unicamp and the Pontifical Catholic University (PUC).

I am familiar with publications of Brazilian researchers, so I have a sort of a general picture. Furthermore, your question is more about names and labels. There is a kind of a mess about terminology and labels, and honestly, for me, this not an unusual problem at all. Instead of discussing labels is much better to discuss the content: what stands behind the label, what is under the label? So, for me, the question is the relationship among different theories.

In fact, we talked about three theories. The first one is what we know as Cultural-Historical Theory, developed by Vygotsky, where Luria and Leontiev also participated as well as some other researchers, and the second, in turn, which is known as an Activity Theory, developed by Alexey Leontiev in the Soviet Union in the 30s. To say correctly, Leontiev started to develop the Activity Theory in the 30s and then developed it through all his life – to the late 70s. The third theory is known as the Cultural-Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), which started in the late 90s.

Nevertheless, for some people, these are three generations of the same theory – CHAT. However, my vision is that there are three theories, not one. I think the tradition of presenting these theories as one theory, as three generations of a theory is, not correct. This is not only my point of view, as it contradicts historical facts. There are three theories, and they are in very complex relationships with each other.

Let us take, for example, Vygotsky's theory and Leontiev's theory: they are very closely related and connected, but they are two different theories.

Leontiev started to work with Vygotsky in 1925, he was in Vygotsky's team, he was one of Vygotsky's closest collaborators of and if you look at Leontiev's first great book, published in 1931, 'The Development of Memory', we see that Vygotsky wrote the preface. Unfortunately, this book was not translated, and it was published only once in 1931, and after that, it was never published again. However, if you are lucky enough to find this book

in a library, if you can read it in the Russian Language, you can see that this book is in complete accordance with Vygotsky's principles. The cultural logical memory is seen as a higher psychological function; it is social by origin, cultural tools mediate it, and it has voluntary functioning.

Then, taken as a higher psychological function, memory develops, and this is cultural development – all of these terminologies are absolutely Vygotsky's terminology, an absolutely Vygotsky an theoretical framework.

However, when we look at Leontiev's writings from 1934, we can see much criticism on Vygotsky's theory. The reason is that in the early 1930s, Leontiev moved away from Historical- Cultural Theory and started to develop the Activity Theory. So, at first, Leontiev was working along the same line as Vygotsky. Then, he started to establish his own separated line 'as an alternative to Vygotsky, as opposition to Vygotsky'. Moreover, he was very critical to Vygotsky.

For example, Leontiev did not accept *Perezhivanie's* as a unit of analysis. For Vygotsky, the *Perezhivanie* concept was one of the most important, for Leontiev, it merely did not exist. You will never find in Leontiev's works anything about *Perezhivanie* because his theory was built on a different basis. I am not saying the Activity Theory was incorrect; I'm saying that it is different from Historical- Cultural Theory.

Therefore, there are both similarities and differences between these theories. Similarities are profound, and the differences are also profound. The problem, however, is that Vygotskyans, or neo-Vygotskians, (they call themselves neo-Vygotskyans – see Karpov's book, for example) do not have these differences in their agenda. Unfortunately, contemporary Vygotskyans are not even ready to discuss what are the similarities and what are the differences between Vygotsky's Cultural-Historical Theory and Leontiev's Activity Theory. The issue is not on their agenda, and the reason is straightforward: they have a minimal and superficial understanding of these theories. So, the biggest problem for neo-Vygotskyans is that they do not see the theoretical depth of these two surfaces. When I read their works, I have an impression they are just scratching the surface; they are just making puzzles and combining things. That is why for me, the most important is to make in-depth analysis, a comparative analysis, a conceptual, theoretical, philosophical, logical, methodological study about similarities and differences between these two grand theories.

I am not critical to Activity Theory, I say it is a grand theory, it is very influencing, mighty, exciting, very profound...but what I am saying is: this theory is different from Historical- Cultural Theory. So, the more Vygotsky resources, sources become available, the better we understand that there is no direct continuation between Vygotsky and Leontiev. The more publications become available, the more original texts from Vygotsky's archives appear, the more Leontiev publications we find ... we can see then more and more facts, just apparent facts that the representation of these two theories as two different periods or generations is not valid. There are similarities, but there are also significant differences.

Moreover, that is why – returning to Brazilian content – labels are not important, what is important is that in Brazil there is an exciting, well-working community of Vygotskyans scholars, There is a group, a very interesting group of researchers following Leontiev's approach. Furthermore, this is very interesting, and I think this is the essential thing... so, matter how they call themselves – Vygotskyans, CHAT researchers or whatever - what is important is what they are doing, and that is absolutely fantastic.

I want to say – and just not to be polite and to be pleased to Brazilian audience – that the center of the Cultural- Historical studies is now not in Russia or North America, but it is

in Brazil. Brazil is the country where the most distinct things happen. Brazil is now becoming a country number 1 in Vygotsky studies, and that makes me very happy. That is why the next ISCAR Congress will be in Brazil. This is the sign of the contribution of Brazilians researchers to the whole field. You see how many interesting publications of Brazilian researchers are now. Vygotskian community is really becoming a very influential community, which contributes significantly to the improvement of the Brazilian educational system. I attended the Brazilian ISCAR conference, my friend Professor Doctor Fernanda Liberali invited me, and I could see people from the field of experimental work, theoretical, methodological... so there is this variety of research focus that is framed by CHT or AT. This is life... there is much life in Brazil, and of course the political situation is not as good as we all know, but what Brazilian colleagues are doing is fantastic, and this means that Brazil is becoming the center of international Cultural-Historical and Activity Theory studies. That is why I am so happy to have friends there... Brazilian doctoral professors, researchers, Ph.D. students with whom I cooperate for several years.

The only problem is not political, but unfortunately, many Brazilians do not publish in English... many of their publications are in Portuguese, sometimes in French, Spanish – and of course, these are all high languages. However, English is the language of the scientific community. Every time I visit Brazil, every time I meet young researchers I say, “Please think about how to publish in English because I want international people to know how interesting is the work that Brazilian researchers have done [...] how they are applying these ideas into clinical practice, for working study, working conditions, psychotherapy, drama and everything”.

We need to think collectively about how to present Brazil to the international community in the best possible way. Because there are many things to be proud of, and the problem is that not too many people know what Brazilian researches do. So that is a kind of diplomatic answer to your question: so I wish all my Brazilian colleagues all the best and I am ready to help in anyway...contributing to a book, coming to conferences, organizing seminars, participating in courses for doctoral students, whatever...

Ana Caroline: Talking about the importance of a proper methodology, in Brazil, we recognize the book *Lectures of pedology* as a mature expression of Vygotsky's theory. As we know that you have recently translated it into the English language, could you talk a little bit more about these lectures and their importance?

Professor Nikolai: My colleague from the USA, David Kellogg, who now lives in Korea, invited me to participate in a project to translate Vygotsky's *Lectures on pedology* into English. I know that Zoia Prestes translated this book into Portuguese, and there is a Spanish version. Besides, you probably do not know, but it is translated into Korean by David Kellogg and his team in Seoul, Korea. His idea was to make it available for teachers, not only for academics, because Vygotsky gave all lectures to Russian teachers in 1933-1934, a few weeks before his death. Moreover, the Korean translation looks interesting: each page is divided into two parts; there is the translation and also the comments, explanations for teachers. This is one of the books in the project that David is doing in South Korea; he published the collected works of Vygotsky in 11 volumes by now. It was a very successful project, a bestseller book in South Korea.

Then he decided to repeat the same success in English, and he invited me to participate in the translation. We have this book recently published under the title *L. S.*

Vygotsky pedological works: volume 1. The project idea is to publish the collection of all key Vygotsky's pedological works, including those that have never been translated into English. It is a long-term project, and now we are working on volume 2, which will be the book called *The problem of age* and then the three volumes of *Pedology of Adolescent* – the book that so far only exists in Russian.

What I really like is that we tried to do a very good translation because the problem, one of the biggest problems, is that, unfortunately, the English translations are still very far from being at least satisfactory. I am proud to say that our translation is excellent because we have been working very hard for 15 months in translating, checking and correcting. I believe that the translation is good because David Kellogg is one of the experts in Vygotsky's pedology, he can read and understand Russian, and he is a linguist. I am also a little bit of an expert in Vygotsky's studies and not a linguist; however, I am Russian, so I think this is a very good combination of translators.

Regarding your question, I can say these seven lectures cannot be considered as a mature expression of Vygotsky's theory. This book is one of several other works by Vygotsky that shows the second period, a new period in the theory development when Vygotsky moved from studying the genesis process of higher psychological functions to the study of their interrelationship, differentiation and subordination in the development course. This last period started in 1930-1931. However, the process of developing higher psychological functions remains the subject-matter of the theory. Differentiation and subordination of the higher psychological functions system are also an essential aspect of complex systems development.

Besides, that is not the whole story. To understand why this book is important, we have to look at the landscape that we call Vygotskian studies, international global studies on Vygotsky... Please, note, what I am going to say now is just my private, humble opinion, and many people might dislike this. However, I think it is time to make a critical review of the state of the arts in this field.

We have a vast community of Vygotskyans, neo-Vygotskyans, post-Vygotskyans, and non-Vygotskian - researchers influenced or inspired by Vygotsky. We have ISCAR as an international community, and I should say something that may seem offensive. However, I should say this openly: if you look at this territory that is called 'Vygotskian studies', you see that theoretically, methodologically, experimentally, their studies are pitiful and pathetic (excluding Brazil, of course).

What are my reasons to say this? One might say that these statements contradict reality. You see these great Vygotskian communities in many countries; ISCAR Congress happens every three years; Vygotsky is known worldwide; hundreds, thousands of articles and publications, an ocean of literature. After all of this, you crazy Nicolai is saying it is a 'miserable state'. So, am I crazy? Why is Nikolai so disrespectful for great researchers working in this field?

Let us do a small experiment (and I do this sometimes during my presentations). I ask two simple and fundamental questions.

Question number 1: tell me, what is the subject matter of CHT? What is this theory about? The second question is: every theory, a serious theory, in a classical meaning of the word, should be based on laws, laws that exist objectively, like physics laws, biology laws... So, how many laws of psychological development are presented in Cultural- Historical Theory? I do not ask to answer the formulations of these laws. I just need a number. How many laws? One, two, six, less or more?

These are simple questions; these are basic questions. We cannot imagine the physicist – a researcher in the field of classical mechanics who is unable to answer the question of what classical (Newtonian) theory is about and how many laws of mechanics it includes. How can someone do any serious scientific research in this field, having no knowledge about these basic things?

However, contemporary Vygotskyans often have no clear answers to these simple questions. You can ask 100 researchers who identified themselves as belonging to Vygotsky's theoretical tradition, and you have 100 different answers. The most confusing is that nobody sees any problem here – in times of post-modernism and multiple truths when everyone is right, what we have is the situation of millions of interpretations and interpretations of interpretations. However, Vygotsky's task was to build psychology as an objective science that means to discover objectively existing processes and the laws these processes obey. The same thing Darwin did in biology with the theory of evolution. I am not against interpretations, but I am against the voluntary interpretations that are not based on knowledge and a clear understanding. In science, some things cannot be interpreted the way we like or want to. For example, $E = mc^2$ cannot be interpreted like $M = ec^2$, but concerning Vygotsky's theory, this is precisely what happens when you read some books of many Vygotskyans. I can give you names and examples, but what I am speaking about is the general picture coming from the secondary literature. So, tell me after this, who from the traditional psychology will take seriously people, who promote the Vygotsky's theory and who, at the same time, do not have a common view of what this theory is about?

Now I am coming to the answer to your question. In this book, there are at least three lectures absolutely devoted to psychology: the Problem of Heredity, the Problem of Environment and the General Laws of Psychological Development. In addition to other essential texts, these Lectures on Pedology answer the question – what Historical- Cultural Theory is about and what exactly is the subject-matter of the theory. Vygotsky himself gives this answer.

Question 2 (How many laws?) is also enjoyable. The literature on Historical- Cultural Theory mostly highlights one law – the general genetic law, which states that every higher psychological function appears twice. Some secondary literature gives lists of 3 or 4 laws, but if you take them, you will see the lists are different. There is no consensus about how many laws are presented and explained in Vygotsky's original writings, which are published and available. Now, tell me, can anyone from the traditional psychology take seriously the group of researchers promoting Vygotsky's theory, who, at the same time, actually have no clear vision about even the number of the laws this theory is built on? Please realize that I am speaking on an elementary level, just about the numbers. However, the situation is even worse – instead of using Vygotsky's original formulations in these laws, neo-Vygotskyan simply interpret them the way they want, and they even like to contradict their original meaning. This makes Vygotsky's theory a sort of 'umbrella' to cover any kind of experimental and empirical studies, which has nothing to do with the Cultural- Historical Theory.

However, if you look at lecture 5 of *Lectures on pedology*, Vygotsky gives us a series of laws on psychological development; he formulated these laws in a very proper way; he explains these laws, and he gives examples from research and from the everyday practice of how these laws work. If you know the other laws presented in *The history of development of higher psychological functions* (Volume 4 of the Collected Works) and the *Pedology of an adolescent* (Volume 5 Collected Works) then as a result you have a complete list of all laws of psychological development on which the theory is based on. So, that is why this

book is significant. This is the only book where Vygotsky presents four more laws of development (laws of differentiation and subordination of psychological functions) in which he was focused on the last period of his work. In addition to the laws discovered in his previous period, together, we have the complete list. So, that gives us the answer.

Finally, in his lectures, Vygotsky introduces important concepts such as the development of the social situation, the interaction of the ideal and present forms, and the *Perezhivanie* concept. That is why this book is so important.

Moreover, there is another point to explain why this book is essential: one of the problems with contemporary Vygotskyans is that in many cases, they are not applying a historical approach to CHT. What does that mean? That means that they are taking everything Vygotsky wrote and published as CHT. They do not see the evolution of Vygotsky's view; Vygotsky in the 20s and then at the beginning of the 30s is different. For many people, he is just one. There is no history – but there is a history in the development of Vygotsky's thoughts. There was a history, he changed his approach through a dramatic crisis... and Vygotsky even rejected his earlier ideas! For example, in the early 20s, he defined consciousness as the reflex of reflexes –but he rejected that idea at later periods. He said that the reflex is not a good concept to explain any kind of human mind development. Nevertheless, some Vygotskyans really take this evolution of Vygotsky's theoretical conception seriously.

There is an agreement, and the agreement is that there were three periods in Vygotsky's work where he has developed different approaches. I am not discussing the first one because it was reflexological and behavioristic. Therefore, the point is the second and third periods: what happens is that for many researchers, the most important is the second period. If you look at the Cultural- Historical Activity Theory (CHAT), you will see that they take the idea of mediated activity as one of the ideas that Vygotsky developed during the second period. Moreover, if you look at how much they have published about double stimulation as the method from the second period– this is the period when Historical- Cultural Theory started to be developed, we can call it the first period in CHT. The problem is that even high-level experts are focused on the second period and not looking at the third one. For many researchers, it is the opposite. For example, to Fernando Gonzales Rey, my friend and colleague, the second period was not relevant, because he was focused on the first period when Vygotsky discusses subjectivity, motivation, *Perezhivanie*, and then there was a kind of gap called instrumental psychology and Vygotsky was not satisfied with this 'instrumental' approach; then, he came back to the ideas of the first period and started developing the same ideas like subjectivity, *Perezhivanie* sense and so on....

Therefore, some people highlight the second period; some people highlight the third period, neglecting the whole story.

This book, *Lectures on pedology*, answers the question: this book shows that there is not a gap between the second period and the third one. It is a continuation, and the third one is entirely based on the second one. If you locate this book, historically, you see there is an absolute continuity between the first and the last period of CHT.

Nevertheless, there is also a discontinuity: this is also very important, because during the first period of CHT (1927-1931) Vygotsky was mostly focused on discovering the laws of origins of the genesis of higher psychological functions – how they originate, how social becomes individual, its process of origin and genesis. That was the focus that was the kind of general idea. In the third period, the task had changed; it was a different research program.

I can put it simply. Is it essential to discover the development of higher psychological functions 'after they are internalized?' Yes, it is also an important aspect of development – for example, what happens after a new higher function appears? The child already has a system of psychological functions and what happens is that this system begins to reorganize itself – it reorganizes itself creating a new hierarchy of psychological functions when some functions become subordinated, others become central when the functions differ and change their role – this was called 'inter-functional connections and relationships'.

So, several laws of reorganization are presented in this book. Our understanding of development will remain incomplete if we do not understand it dialectically as a series of qualitative changes or as a metamorphosis, reorganization of the existing system. That is why Vygotsky says, every psychological age is a qualitatively different system of organization of the higher psychological functions, which is typical, only for this age – and this is what separates one psychological age from another. In this sense, the last period of Vygotsky's work was the continuation of his previous work. However, the focus has changed – from studying the process of sociocultural genesis of higher psychological functions to studying the processes of reorganization, differentiation and subordination of different ages of a child. They are connected dialectally to each other.

Moreover, the last thing. When publishing this book, we (David and I) had in mind the new generation of researchers, people as you Carol, in Brazil, Russia, Australia, North America, China, Japan, everywhere – for that new generation of researchers who want to understand deeply, and not follow the interpretations of interpretations of interpretations, but want to get to the bottom of CHT. This is important not only for academic purposes – but it will help us to find better ways of how we can support any kind of social institutes, families... it opens up a vast field for practical applications.

I want to use this opportunity to say a few words: our work should have practical results if we want to continue Vygotsky's tradition, and my hope is oncoming generation. That is why my colleagues and I work with young researches and Ph.D. students – as you know, ISCAR supports the annual Moscow summer ISCAR University for young researchers. Every ISCAR Congress begins with the special pre-congress say – "Ph.D. day" where students from different countries present and discuss their work under the guidance of famous doctoral professors who are experts in this field. Here at Monash, we have an international cultural- historical- reading group, and you have participated in our meetings. I am grateful to my friends and colleagues from Brazil for sending their Ph.D. students to do the 'sandwich program' here at Monash University. We are still opening up the Vygotsky legacy, we are still discovering the Cultural- Historical Theory, and I am happy to do this with a new generation who wants to open the beauty and power of the Cultural- Historical Theory. The publication of *The Lectures on pedology* is a step forward in this way.

Received: Aug. 24, 2020

Approved: Sep. 04, 2020

Ana Caroline Toffanelli: Graduated in Psychology at State University of Maringa (UEM), Master in Psychology at UEM, PhD student in Psychology at UEM. Assistant professor in Department of Education at State University of Londrina (UEL).

Adriana de Fátima Franco: Graduated in Psychology at State University of Sao Paulo (UNESP/ Bauru), Master in Educational Psychology at Pontifical Catholic University (PUC/ SP), PhD in Education at PUC / SP and Post-doctorate in Education at UNESP/Araraquara. Professor in Department of Psychology and in the Post-Graduation Program in Psychology at State University of Maringa (UEM).