

## ***Perezhivanie*: Advancing on its implications for the cultural-historical approach**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to discuss the relevance that the concept of *perezhivanie* had for Soviet psychology and its implication for the development of topics that have been largely neglected both in Soviet psychology and in the Western Vygotskian tradition. According to the position defended in this paper, *perezhivanie* is not just another concept of Vygotsky's repertoire, it was an expression of the representation of one theoretical system that evolved in Vygotsky's thinking at the end of his work. Despite the fact that *perezhivanie* was introduced by Vygotsky in *Psychology of Art*, this paper emphasizes the relevance of the concept in the final moment of Vygotsky's work, specifically in 1933-1934, when the concept was used by the author as the unit of human development in its articulation with the concept of "social situation of development". The paper focuses on the relevance of both concepts for advancing a new definition of human development from a cultural-historical standpoint, as well as the topic of subjectivity within this theoretical account.

### **Keywords**

*Perezhivanie*; social situation of development; human development; subjectivity.

## Introduction

For many years, the concept of *perezhivanie* was overlooked in Soviet psychology and in the circles of Vygotskian studies. In the last ten years, however, the concept has gained in popularity especially in Western psychology. The question is: why? In our opinion, this increasing interest is the result of three factors. First, an increasing interest in the topics of motivation and, particularly, emotions within cultural-historical psychology. These topics, historically, were relegated to the study of psychological cognitive functions and intellectual processes in this theoretical framework. Second, is the increasing number of English-language publications on the topic, which has helped focus attention on the specific characteristics of the term (Fakhrutdinova, 2010; Flear & Quinones, 2013; González Rey, 2009, 2015b; Smagorinsky, 2011). Until the 1990s, the term *perezhivanie* was translated into English merely as 'experience', a mistake that even appeared in the translation of the *Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky* (1998) in English. Third, the movement that aimed to review the dominant interpretation of Vygotsky occurred in both Russian and Western psychology (González Rey, 2011; A. A. Leontiev, 1992; Yasnitsky, 2009, 2012; Zinchenko, 1993).

The growing interest in the concept of *perezhivanie* also carries with it certain dangers. First, the danger of trying to extend the concept beyond the scope envisioned by Vygotsky, whilst appealing to Vygotsky to legitimize these attempts; second, the danger of treating the concept as merely one more of Vygotsky's concepts without distinguishing *perezhivanie* from any of his other concepts.

This paper aims to discuss some of the implications of the concept of *perezhivanie* for the current paths of cultural-historical psychology. Consequently, in this paper the concept will be used in accordance with the latter definitions proposed by Vygotsky.

In order to understand the relevance of the concept of *perezhivanie* for advancing on new general questions about this theoretical framework we must shed light on the theoretical intention that lies behind the concrete definition. The concept of *perezhivanie* was first used by Vygotsky in *The Psychology of Art* (1965) where it was closely associated with the complex affective expressions that are involved in artistic performance. In that work, Vygotsky's main interest was the individual in its creative production. Because Art was a strong interest of Vygotsky, he chose this field for developing some of his main ideas about the relation between emotions, imagination and fantasy; all of them intrinsically interrelated in creative performance. However, the development of these topics was interrupted in 1924 when Vygotsky joined Kornilov's group, and he only came back to them at the end of his life (Zinchenko, 2009).

## The concept of *perezhivanie* in the context of Soviet psychology

Soviet psychology was a very heterogeneous movement that was not monopolized by any of the different theoretical trends that coexisted in the Soviet Union throughout its short history. A cultural historical view of Soviet psychology must consider the convulsive, contradictory, and repressive moments experienced in Soviet society in those years and the way in which those moments influenced the paths and contradictions that characterized Soviet psychology (González Rey, 2014). These specific, dramatic conditions under which Soviet psychology developed make it impossible to represent that psychology as a coherent and systematic knowledge base founded on general principles and categories shared by all Soviet psychologists. In our opinion, it is always important to take into account, when discussing Soviet psychology, the positions that were politically dominant in the different historical moments and that in one way or another exerted pressure on the dominant language of that psychology.

One characteristic tendency relevant to all of these positions was to “dissolve” the specific nature of the human psyche in other ontological definitions, be they the principles and laws of higher nervous activity (e.g., Pavlov, Bechterev) or reality itself, taken as external, primary and objective in relation to individuals, as was defended by Kornilov’s reactology. A. N. Leontiev<sup>1</sup>, Luria, and Vygotsky, as part of Kornilov’s group, were influenced by this position: during that period, Vygotsky oriented himself towards an instrumental-behavioral approach to the higher psychological functions, whereas Leontiev and Luria focused on behavior and on the study of cognitive functions. As Luria stated in 1928:

The psychologists as a rule share the objective positions of physiologists but carry on their work on a much broader basis, approaching psychology from the point of view of that structural behavior which is determined by social conditions” (Luria, 1928, p. 347).

A. A. Leontiev<sup>2</sup> referred to the period during which Vygotsky, Luria, and Leontiev were together as part of Kornilov’s group:

Vygotsky charged his colleagues with the task of empirical studies of the instruments that mediated memory, attention and generalization. Aleksei Nikolaevich took the first topic and developed in an extreme detail, the result of which was his monograph *The development of memory: An empirical study of higher psychological functions*. This was completed in 1928. Vygotsky wrote the foreword to this monograph (A. A. Leontiev, 1984, p. 12).

In both of the previous citations, the instrumental path taken by the group in that moment is evident. The focus was constrained to the study of psychological functions whose higher character was defined by the mediation of artificial devices in a specific scheme: “S-X-R, in which X is an instrument, S is the goal of activity (stimulus), and R is the result of activity” (A.A. Leontiev, 1984, p. 11).

The change proposed by Vygotsky only some years after *The Psychology of Art* had been completed was quite dramatic; in fact, extremely radical when we consider that it is a spontaneous path that he took within a short period of time. This instrumental position prevailed in the works of Vygotsky between 1928 and 1930 (González Rey, 2011). The group headed by Kornilov was the only group to defend this position in Soviet psychology and as such, this position strongly influenced its members. A. A. Leontiev in the cited paper defined the period between 1927 and 1929 as follows:

The cultural-historical school was born in the second half of 1925. Until 1927 the conception of this school was in a certain sense developed in a reactological “language” . . . but by the end of 1929 a fundamentally new and very promising problem area came to fruition within the instrumental concept (A. A. Leontiev, 1984, p. 11).

The same A. A. Leontiev changed his position in 1992 when he stated:

It’s really quite astonishing that the literature on [Vygotsky] in Russian and other languages tends to focus exclusively on the ideas of only one period of his life, ideas that he himself later went beyond. These are usually the ideas of the “cultural-historical theory”. But the Vygotskys of 1925, 1930 and 1933-1934 are not all the same (p. 41).

Coming from such an important Soviet psychologist, the prior comment deserves at least careful attention, in particular when today, there are still many psychologists who represent Vygotsky

mainly through the concepts he developed during his “cultural-historical period”, that is, the period when Vygotsky focused on higher psychological functions, mediation, internalization and operations. However, as was observed by A. A. Leontiev, the period between 1932 and 1934 was a special one in Vygotsky’s production: it was the moment when the subject of the imagination, emotions, and *perezhivanie* returned to being central to Vygotsky’s work. It is amazing, given that they declared themselves the followers of Vygotsky’s legacy, that Leontiev and his followers paid no attention to any of Vygotsky’s last concepts, among which *perezhivanie* was particularly criticized by Leontiev some years after Vygotsky’s death (A. N. Leontiev, 1998).

*Perezhivanie* was used by Vygotsky alongside other concepts that were associated with the individual’s emotional sphere, such as imagination, fantasy, and emotion. However, it appeared that Vygotsky was attempting to represent the affective domain as being a complex system of human psyche, the center of which was *perezhivanie*. In fact, he stated: “by its nature, artistic *perezhivanie* remains incomprehensible and closed to the subject in its course and essence” (Vygotsky, 1965, p. 25). Thus Vygotsky made explicit the difference between *perezhivanie* and simple emotion. At the same time in that brief statement, Vygotsky defined *perezhivanie* as part of a realm that is impossible to access through individual intellectual and conscious resources. This position was far from A. N. Leontiev’s attempt to replace psychological concepts with the concept of activity, as is clearly expressed by Elkonin in the following statement:

The idea of this so-called internal—or, I might better say—intellectual activity has become confused with the question of the division of any activity, including intellectual activity, into an orienting and an executive component. This division seems to me to be real not only for external, practical activity, i.e., for an activity that accomplishes some practical task by outwardly changing things but also for activities that we call intellectual (Zaporozhets, Galperin, & Elkonin, 1995, p. 32).

In the quotation above, activity is defined not only by external operations with objects but also as internal activity that replaces psychological processes. At the same time, this internal activity is identified as intellectual activity, leaving out the affective processes in that definition.

Vygotsky first used the concept of *perezhivanie* in *The Psychology of Art* within a group of concepts that, taken together, permitted a new representation about the place of emotions in human performances. He vigorously returned to the concept at the end of his work with a new theoretical proposal: to advance on the idea of the relative character of social influences on children’s development. The omission of this concept in Soviet psychology is evident in the epilogue written by D. B. Elkonin to Volume IV of the *Collected Works of L. S. Vygotsky* (1984) in the Russian language. In this Epilogue, Elkonin devoted only one paragraph to the concept of *perezhivanie*, which was essentially addressed to L. I. Bozhovich and her group, stressing that it was the only group that used that concept in Soviet psychology.

That omission can be clearly explained today by the deep contradictions between *perezhivanie* and the main concepts and principles of Activity Theory, which was the dominant psychological theory from a political point of view in Soviet psychology from the end of the 1950s to the middle of the 1970s. Leontiev’s explicit critique of the concept of *perezhivanie* was a powerful element in excluding this concept from the repertoire of Soviet psychology. Leontiev essentially criticized Vygotsky’s concept of *perezhivanie* for having abstracted the child from its immediate and direct

relationship with material reality. In his critiques of Vygotsky that were devoted to pedology, A. N. Leontiev (1998)<sup>3</sup> stated:

Before the child enters in contact with his/her mother in verbal communication, he relates to her as the being who immediately satisfies his/her need for food, the immediate object of his/her first instinctive need—the food need. But even if we observe more complex ways of satisfying the child's needs, on the basis of which the child's higher, specific human needs are developed, then we find that the child's relationships with reality are first and foremost material relationships (p. 121; first author's translation from Russian).

That prior position of Leontiev explicitly or implicitly ruled Activity Theory throughout all of Leontiev's life. His above statement that the child relates to her mother “like the immediate object of its first instinctive need” is an affirmation that embodies the principles of Activity Theory. This idea considers the adult only the “instrument” for satisfying the child's need, completely ignoring the affective relevance of the child-mother relationship.

### *Perezhivanie* as an expression of a new moment in Vygotsky's thinking

Vygotsky's most relevant contributions to the concept of *perezhivanie* and its relevance for psychological development appeared in the transcriptions of lectures he gave in 1933-1934. These lectures were “The crisis at age seven” and “The problem of the environment”. In these writings, although Vygotsky maintained the same vagueness in his definition of the concept's psychological nature that characterized his use of the concept in *The Psychology of Art*, he advanced on some themes in relation to which he had never before used the concept in his work.

In “The crisis at age seven”, Vygotsky clearly used *perezhivanie* as the unity of psychological development that was responsible for the transition in a child's development from one period to another. On this, he stated: “To say that in the crisis at age seven preschool experiences change to school experiences, is to say that a new unity of environmental and personal factors has appeared that makes the new stage of development possible - school age” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 292). That is, *perezhivanie* is the psychological unit around which are organized the main psychological acquisitions that allow us to explain the transitions from one stage of development to another. At the same time, Vygotsky questioned the objective and the determinant role of external objective factors: “For the child, his relation to the environment has changed, and this means that the environment itself has changed, it means that the course of the child's development has changed and that a new period in development has started” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 292).

Based on the above quotation, it is possible to say that the objective environment does not exist for children as a separated ground, and consequently, does not exist for human beings either. A person's environment changes as the result of the person's psychological repertoire for living in that environment, which implies the recognition that the environment is always relative to the individual psychological resources that appear in each period of life through *perezhivanie*. The implications of Vygotsky's statement, quoted above, were rather extreme considering the dominant principles based on Activity Theory that ruled Soviet psychology at the time.

The concept of *perezhivanie* did not represent one more concept; it represented the same thinking in transition that characterized the main concepts discussed by Vygotsky between 1932 and 1934. As A. A. Leontiev wrote in his emblematic paper “Ecce homo: Methodological problems of the activity-theoretical approach”: “Here I will focus on the ideas of Vygotsky's last year, from late

1933 to his death in 1934. Our task will be to grasp the logic of this uncompleted work and attempt to extrapolate the tendencies that were development in his thinking” (A. A. Leontiev, 1992, p. 42).

Unfortunately, to date, little has been done to rescue Vygotsky’s final legacy because the dominant representation of his thoughts largely prevents understanding new interpretations about his work.

The emergence of a new system of ideas always questions some of the main principles that prevailed before these new ideas. Vygotsky, however, did not make explicit the new psychological system in which concepts such as *perezhivanie* and sense are related. His short treatment of both concepts permits us to advance a new representation of many of the principles and definitions that prevailed in Soviet psychology from the beginning of the 1960s to the end of the 1970s. Vygotsky separated psychological concepts and activity, thinking about the human psyche as a system that he never equated with internal activity:

To state a certain, general, formal position, it would be correct to say that the environment determines the development of the child through *perezhivanie*<sup>4</sup> of the environment. Most essential, therefore, is rejection of the absolute indicators of the environment; the child is part of the social situation, and the relation of the child to environment and the environment to the child occurs through *perezhivanie* and activity of the child himself (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 294).

In Vygotsky’s quotation, it is clear that *perezhivanie* pertains to the psychological domain and that activity and *perezhivanie* represent two different concepts. At the same time, Vygotsky returned to emphasizing that *perezhivanie*, as a psychological unit, is the way through which the influence of environment takes place. This means, as Vygotsky reiterated multiple times during “The crisis at age seven”, that there are different environments for different children, a fact that does not permit considering the environment as an external objective reality in relation to individuals. Vygotsky’s position is one more expression of the general psychology he was considering at that moment: his position in relation to *perezhivanie* and to the “social situation of development” characterized a new understanding of the relation between social environment and individual, and it represented a turning point in the comprehension of this relation within Soviet psychology at the time.

Vygotsky, however, could not advance more on defining the psychological nature of *perezhivanie*, and this did not permit him to understand that the child and the environment are reciprocally configured to each other in their subjective natures through the child’s permanent relationships with others. Vygotsky even advanced in defining *perezhivanie* as the unity of consciousness, emphasizing its systemic character within a psychological system: “Attention is not a unity of consciousness, but is an element of consciousness in which there is not a series of other elements, while the unity of consciousness as such disappears, and *perezhivanie* is the actual dynamics of the unit of consciousness, that is, the whole from which organized consciousness is the *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 383: first author’s translation from Russian). However, Vygotsky never advanced in the understanding of social environment as a system of social relations in which the child is an active constituent.

Given that Vygotsky did not define the psychological nature of *perezhivanie* and sense, both of them were used in different texts as units of consciousness, a fact that expressed Vygotsky’s uncertainties in relation to these concepts; both remained uncompleted in his work. This is one of

the reasons why concepts such as sense and *perezhivanie* were never related to each other in Vygotsky's work, where both were used interchangeably in situations in which both could be used. The pressure of his sickness and the fact that he focused on *perezhivanie* at the very last moment of his life were largely responsible for this fact.

Because the concept of *perezhivanie* had so many meanings in Vygotsky's work and it remained incomplete, it is difficult to use his concept in concrete research. However, *perezhivanie* had many implications for a new representation of human development from a cultural historical standpoint.

In his critique of the concept of *perezhivanie* in his above-mentioned writing, A. N. Leontiev (1998) was correct when he stated: "What is *perezhivanie*? L. S. Vygotsky defined *perezhivanie* as the unity of environmental and personal moments, but this is a formal definition" (Leontiev, 1998, p. 115; first author's translation from Russian). Leontiev had, many years before, perceived the vagueness of the concept. However, the main critique that he addressed in his draft was that the concept of *perezhivanie* breaks down a child's immediate and direct material relation with reality. In fact, the concept of *perezhivanie* broke down the immediate social determinism that ruled Soviet psychology at that time, and from our point of view, this is the one of the strong points in Vygotsky's definition of the concept.

### ***Perezhivanie* as the basis for a new representation of psychological development in cultural-historical psychology.**

It is interesting that Vygotsky did not refer to the concept of activity in his lectures of 1933 and 1934, the transcriptions of which were titled "The crisis at age seven" and "The problem of environment". Vygotsky in this last period advanced both a new theory of consciousness and a new comprehension of human development. The theoretical representation of human development is intrinsically associated with one general psychological theory by which human development is at the same time a specific branch of psychological theory and a topic of general psychology.

In the so-called "Cultural-Historical Activity Theory", the concept of leading activity—a label that has been widely criticized by other authors also working based on the legacy of Vygotsky and Soviet psychology (González Rey, 2002, 2009, 2014; Mikhailov, 2002; Orlov, 2003; Yasnitsky, 2012; Zinchenko, 1993, 2002)—has been used as the cornerstone for the study of human development.

In the last ten years, when the concepts of the social situation of development and *perezhivanie* began to be better known in Western psychology, some authors used these terms as complements to the concept of "leading activity" as if they were perfectly compatible. In fact, they are founded on two completely different theoretical frameworks, one of which was based on Vygotsky's last works, which were oriented to defining a psychological unit of child development; *perezhivanie* also considered the social environment as inseparable in its relevance from this psychological unit. The other framework was represented by the Activity Theory, the main principles of which were based on the relevance of the concept of leading activity.

Vygotsky defined *perezhivanie* as a unit of consciousness (Vygotsky, 1984), but at the same time he attributed a special function to *perezhivanie* in the child's development. He stated on this topic:

It is possible to say, that in the crisis at seven years preschool *perezkhivanie* becomes school age. What this means is that there appears a new unity [*edinstva*] of environmental and personal moments, which makes possible a new stage of development- the school age (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 380; first author's translation from Russian).

In the previous quotation, he did not use the term unit explicitly, however the meaning in which unity is used makes it possible to consider *perezkhivanie* as a unit of development, since it defines the emergence of a new stage of development. The distinction between unit and unity throughout “The crisis at age seven” is vague to some extent.

Bozhovich (1968) used *perezkhivanie* as the psychological unit of development. In such a definition, Bozhovich shared the argument articulated by Vygotsky in the previous quotation. While Leontiev focused on explaining how internal (psychological) activity resulted from external activity, Bozhovich advanced on a new conception of the development of personality based on the concepts of *perezkhivanie* and social situation of development (Bozhovich, 1968). In his study about the different moments of the works of A. N. Leontiev, A. A. Leontiev stated: “the fourth cycle of investigations (1936-1940) was based on the following premise: ‘All internal processes are constructed in accordance with a model of external activity and have the same structure’ ” (1984, p. 19).

The above-mentioned formula ruled the work of Leontiev until the end of his life. In his last book, *Activity, Consciousness and Personality* (1975/1978), he reiterated, with few changes, the same formula: external and internal activities share the same structure. This was one of the main principles of Activity Theory that extended to all its theoretical constructions, among which was the concept of leading activity. Leading activity represented that model of external activity that had been previously enunciated by Leontiev within which internal processes emerge during the process of development. The essence of the concept of activity is the same as that which is as defined leading activity.

Leontiev initially formulated the concept of leading activity (fundamental activity) in “*Problema razvitiya psikebi* [The problem of the development of psyche]”. He wrote: “at a given stage, some types of activity will be more prominent and more significant for the further development of the personality; others, less so. Some types will play a leading role in development; others will play a minor role” (A. N. Leontiev, 1965, p. 501).

Based on the concept of *perezkhivanie*, it is not possible to attribute a leading role to activity because it is not activity but *perezkhivanie*, as a psychological concept, that is responsible for the child’s development. According to Vygotsky, the activities or social facts that are relevant for a child’s development can only be explained through *perezkhivanie*. Together with this, the concept of the social situation of development is based more on the concept of relations with the social environment than on the concept of activity. The concept of leading activity was used by Elkonin as the cornerstone of his theory of the periodization of development. According to his proposal, each stage of development is based on one leading activity that is responsible for the child’s main psychological acquisitions in the different stages of development. The mechanical and reductionist character of his proposal is evident in Elkonin’s next statement:

These same investigations established the child’s transition—at the end of infancy—to object activity proper, i.e., to the acquisition of socially evolved modes of action involving



object. The learning of these actions is, of course, impossible without the participation of the adult who demonstrates them to the child and performs them with him. The adult is merely one element—albeit the chief element—within the situation of object activity. Immediate emotional contact with the adult recedes to a subordinate role; the dominant role is now taken over by strictly practical cooperation in the activity at hand. The child is absorbed in the object and his manipulation of it (Elkonin, 1971, p. 241).

The prior citation synthesized some of the main principles that ruled Elkonin's proposal. First, each stage is defined by one leading activity. Second, leading activities can be separated into two types, one that addresses sensorial-cognitive acquisitions and the other the foundation of communicative-motivational acquisitions. That is, the child in one stage, as is evident from the above citation, concentrates on operations with objects and, at other times, on his relations with the adults around him based on communicative activities. Third, the skilled and intellectual operations with objects appeared to be separate from affection. It is quite astonishing that Elkonin only considered the adult to be merely one element of the situation in the quotation above, without considering the intense adult-child affective relation, which is fundamental throughout infancy. The child is represented as a "standard child," and individual children's differences based on personality are completely ignored. The richness of the psychological processes and their interrelations was underestimated in Elkonin's proposal.

One of the more active and productive collaborators of Leontiev, Zaporozhets, wrote:

Essentially, for a long time, we were forced to be content with the fact that some external correlations were established between activity and mental processes, for example, noting that given such and such specific characteristics of activity, or such and such a structure, such and such motivation of activity, and so forth, such and such changes in mental processes occur, although the mechanism of these changes and the very nature of these mental processes were never studied in particular. (Zaporozhets et al., 1995, p. 14)

What is described by Zaporozhets et al. characterized Activity Theory in its different areas of research and, as such, also appeared in Elkonin's proposition about the periodization of human development. This tendency also characterized Vygotsky's main works between 1927 and 1931, a period in which Vygotsky did not express any compromise with the subjective nature of human psychological processes. The tendency to avoid defining the psychological nature of the terms was very general to Soviet psychology based on the fear of being accused of idealism, which was a politically stigmatizing term.

Vygotsky never clearly defined the psychological nature of *perezživanie*; he also did not define clearly what he understood by personality. However, he always referred to *perezživanie* as the unity between personality and environment. *Perezživanie* was a psychological concept that depended largely on the psychological features of personality.

In contrast with Elkonin, whose proposal of periodization was based on the idea that one leading activity ruled each stage of development, Vygotsky emphasized *perezživanie* as inseparable from the social situation of development, in the center of children's development of personality. In one of the multiple statements devoted to *perezživanie* in his work, Vygotsky also used the concept to specify the singular way in which individual psychological resources participate in a given situation at a particular time: "in my *perezživanie* is expressed the extent to which all of my features and how

they are formed in the course of development are involved here at this particular minute” (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 383; first author's translation from Russian)<sup>5</sup>.

This definition is similar to the definition of sense given by Vygotsky: both definitions emphasize the psychological units that are in process during human action. The senses are organized by all of the psychological facts that appear in consciousness with the emergence of the word, and *perezhivanie* is expressed in the set of personal characteristics that appear transiently in every minute of a lived experience. However, Vygotsky never specified the ontological nature of any of these units (González Rey, 2015b).

In his multiple, simultaneous, and not always well-organized ideas about *perezhivanie* at the end of his life, Vygotsky seems to be looking for a psychological unit through the diversity of experiences of people as sets of personal characteristics. He used the terms “set of personal characteristics” or “set of characteristics of personality”, for the lack of a better term, because both terms go in the opposite direction of his definition of unit. According to Vygotsky’s position, no specific activity leads children’s development, but specific “social situation[s] of development” characterize themselves by specific *perezhivaniï*, through which social influences acquire motivational relevance as forces of development.

The use of refraction as the main process in the relation between *perezhivanie* and external influences sent Vygotsky back to a very mechanical formula, according to which “one” external influence was refracted through *perezhivanie*: “therefore, it is not any of the factors in themselves (if taken without reference to the child), which determines how they will influence the future course of his development, but the same factor refracted through the prism of the child’s emotional experience [*perezhivanie*]” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 340).

In “The crisis at age seven”, Vygotsky stated:

We admit in words that it is necessary to study the personality and the environment of the child as a unit<sup>6</sup>. But we must not think that the influence of the personality is on one side and the influence of the environment, on the other, that the one and the other act the way external forces do. However, exactly this is actually done frequently: wishing to study the unity, preliminary investigators break it down and then try to unite one thing with another (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 292).

If we treated *perezhivanie* as a refraction as affirmed by Vygotsky in the former of the quotations above, we are not in fact referring to any psychological unit; we are referring to an external influence that does not change qualitatively and that only changes its course as a result of the psychological characteristics of the child. This was an important theoretical resource used by Vygotsky, Bakhtin, and Rubinstein for avoiding the more mechanical term reflection. However, if *perezhivanie* represented a new psychological unit, as the author noted in the second statement, it would be very important to define that psychological unit, something that Vygotsky could not do.

Another limitation of considering refraction to be the main function of *perezhivanie* is that it implies understanding external influences as one-sided influences that are defined objectively by their indicators, something that Vygotsky criticized in his definition of the social environment. External influences organize themselves as *perezhivanie* in children’s social relations, something that Vygotsky also expressed in his work. However, because he did not define *perezhivanie* as a psychological

generative production, he contradicted himself by using the term refraction. The danger of using refraction only as the prism through which external influences are refracted is that it requires returning to a “subject-object” theoretical scheme in which the external influences that are refracted through the *perezhivanie* led to the disappearance of the child as the active subject of social relations. Social influences in that scheme represent pure objective influences that imply the complete exclusion of the concept of social relationships.

Despite its gaps, the concept of *perezhivanie*, combined with the concept of social situation of development, was highly relevant for advancing a new representation of psychological development from a cultural-historical point of view. Our main arguments to sustain this statement are:

- Using the concept of *perezhivanie*, Vygotsky attempted to define the psychological unit of children’s development in an attempt to overcome the immediate social determinism that was a dominant principle of Soviet psychology at that time.
- Overcoming social determinism allowed Vygotsky to understand the social environment as relative, depending for its significance on the development of the child’s psychological resources. However, Vygotsky examined these psychological resources as depending on the child’s age. In doing this, he omitted the fact that children of the same age have different psychological resources. Vygotsky defined the social situation of development and *perezhivanie* as the basis for defining the different stages of children’s development.
- The concept of *perezhivanie* was associated with the development of personality. Vygotsky focused on psychological systems rather than psychological functions or activity.
- The concept of *perezhivanie*, as was clearly demonstrated in “The crisis at age seven”, also comprised consciousness and the complex psychological processes that distinguished children in different moments of development.

### **Advancing on the legacy of *perezhivanie* and social situation of development**

Bozhovich, who at the end of the 1950s began to advance her own interpretation of Vygotsky’s legacy, oriented herself to the use of this legacy in the study of personality and motivation. In her more relevant book, *The Personality and its Formation in Childhood* (1968), Bozhovich theorized the topics of personality and motivation related to the results of the different lines of research that had been developed in her laboratory. By doing this, she made an important step in defining *perezhivanie*. Being aware of the vagueness of Vygotsky’s definition of *perezhivanie*, she stated:

In other words, what underlies *perezhivanie*, as we see it, is the world of children’s needs—their impulses, desires, intentions, complexly intertwined with one another and interrelated with possibilities for meeting these needs. And this entire complex system of connections, the entire world of a child’s needs and impulses, must be deciphered so that we can understand the nature of the influence external circumstances exert on children’s mental development (Bozhovich, 2009, p. 70).

Bozhovich clearly understood the vacuum in Vygotsky’s definition of the psychological nature of *perezhivanie* by advancing her definition in the above quotation, referring to “the world of children’s needs” and the possibilities for meeting them being “complexly intertwined” with “their impulses, desires and intentions”. With this definition, Bozhovich, in fact, defined *perezhivanie* as the expression of a complex set of motivational features in whose interrelations it is necessary to

decipher how the external circumstances within which children live influence their motivational spheres. In so doing, Bozhovich advanced beyond Vygotsky's definition in two key aspects: first, *perezhivanie* is not related to one specific concrete social influence but instead emerges as the result of the conditions and social relations within which the child lives; and second, the psychological nature of *perezhivanie* is an expression of the motivational system within which different motivational processes relate with each other.

Bozhovich used the concept of *perezhivanie* as a device to advance a more complex definition of motive: motives are complex motivational formations rather than the object of activity, as defined by Leontiev. On this basis, motive never specifically refers to a particular activity because its psychological nature simultaneously integrates different aspects from different areas of the child's life. Advancing on this path, Bozhovich—for the first time in Soviet psychology—defined the motivational sphere as the main core of the psychological nature of personality. In doing this, she advanced the important conclusion that *perezhivanie* had emancipated itself from external conditions to become a self-regulative psychological process. That is, *perezhivanie* acquires a self-generative function. In this regard, she stated:

Children may therefore strive to once again relate to something they experienced previously that became appealing to them. In this case, *perezhivanie* is transformed from being a means of orientation to a goal in and of itself and leads to the emergence of new needs—the need for *perezhivani* themselves. However, in this regard as well, *perezhivani* are not the exception. In the process of development, the entire human mind ceases to be a mere apparatus of orientation and adaptation (Bozhovich, 2009, pp. 74-75)<sup>7</sup>.

The human mind, as Bozhovich noted, is not a mere apparatus of orientation and adaptation; it is a generative system. This position represented an important step forward toward subjectivity. Human subjectivity is the basis on which human creativity developed in that subjective creation transcended the immediateness of adaptation, assimilation and orientation, terms that were the focus of Activity Theory and its followers, which is evident in the next citation:

Psychical development takes place in a process of assimilation of the socio-historical person's experience... It should be emphasized that the process of "assimilation" should not be opposed to the process of "development" because the first appeared as the general way of realization of the second (Davydov, Elkonin, & Markova, 1978, p. 182; first author's translation from Russian).

Assimilation was defined as the general way of realizing development, a position that implied a very conformist orientation in relation to human development and to other social practices such as, for example, education. This model was normative, and it strictly reproduced in psychology the dominant principles under which Soviet society was ruled at that time. In relation to applying the principles of Activity Theory to the activity of study, Yakimanskaya noted: "in the conception of Davydov regarding the activity of study, the subjective experience is understood as the result of the assimilation by the student of the structural elements of this activity" (Yakimanskaya, 1989, p. 11).

Davydov, however, at the end of his life in the 1990s, made a turning point in his work: he came to attribute great importance to the emotions and personality in the activity of study. Davydov and Zinchenko were likely the most critical of Activity Theory among its followers in the 1990s.

In one of his last papers, Davydov (1992) began with Ilyenkov, and from Bozhovich, he brought to light the relevance of symbolic processes and imagination for developing personality. In relation to organizing these psychological processes and formations, Davydov stated: “consciousness is impossible without imagination, and proper imagination ‘organizes’ perception (i.e., sensitivity). All together, they are the basis of the individual creative activity that generates its personality” (Davydov, 1992, p. 26; first author's translation from Russian).

Davydov focused on a topic that was relevant for him until his death: the complex organization of the psychological processes of personality that have a special place in imagination. In his affirmation that “consciousness is impossible without imagination”, Davydov emphasized the subjective, creative side of consciousness, a statement that was very distant from his prior emphasis on assimilation. At the same time, Davydov, for the first time in Soviet psychology, gave symbols a central place in forming the intellectual models that are inseparable from imagination and from emotions.

Davydov, following Vygotsky and Bozhovich, came to the next conclusion: “personality develops on the basis of a particular synthesis of different types of activities and different psychological formations (above all imagination and consciousness), which have different specific weights during one or another period of age, defining the concrete creative potential of the individual” (Davydov, 1992, p. 30). At this moment, Davydov replaced the emphasis on leading activity with an emphasis on a complex psychological unit that integrated different psychological formations as consciousness, imagination and personality in relation to different types of activities as the cornerstone of personality development at each developmental stage. This theoretical construction embodied the spirit of *perezhivanie* as being, at the core of psychological development, a complex unity of different psychological formations with the emphasis on the unity of intellectual and affective processes.

It is evident that the theoretical positions that prevailed in Soviet psychology did not allow for transcending the analytic fragmentation of concepts used to define psychological functions and processes as being separate to each other. For example, thinking, motivation, imagination and fantasy cannot be represented as different interrelated functions. One attempt to overcome this fragmentation is to define new psychological unities founded on new ontological definitions: the unit of symbolic and emotional processes within which the different psychological functions organize themselves as subjective functions represents one attempt in this regard.

In the paper of Davydov quoted above, the author made an important contribution regarding symbolic processes and realities; however, he did not use the symbolic dimension of human phenomena to advance a new type of psychological concept. He, for example, stated the following in regard to symbolic processes:

The creation of new models and things is always considered a creative act of the individual, which is realized through the interrelated capacities of the individual, such as imagination, symbolic replacements and thinking. In its coordination, they are addressed above all to guaranteeing the creative possibilities of the individual (Davydov, 1992, p. 25).

Davydov, in that last moment of his work, was very much committed to the integration of emotions and intellect. His intellect was strongly engaged with the symbolic and emotional

processes of the individual as the subject of his activity, but he could not move forward on the new proposal he was looking for.

### **Advancing the search for a new theoretical representation of subjectivity as a cultural-historical production**

The theoretical representations, discourses and concepts on which science works simultaneously represent devices for advancing qualitative steps in development and should be able to guarantee new research paths in an endless movement. However, in Soviet science, censorship and the continuous interventions of the Communist Party in science did not permit the historical and dialectical movement of science. In addition, this climate of repression always resulted in processes of self-repression, with the repressors emerging from their own sciences. This situation was a great obstacle in advancing the topic of subjectivity even though it was implicit in the works of many of the representative figures of Soviet psychology, as was shown earlier in this paper.

Vygotsky took an important step forward in considering real the world of the individuals' emotions. Bozhovich advanced along this path in her emphasis on the generative character of personality and its independence from the immediate influences of the environment, and Davydov, at the last moment of his work, introduced a very important element for advancing the comprehension of the psychological nature of personality, bringing to the discussion symbolic processes.

However, Davydov treated the symbolic processes as something in themselves, separated from imagination and thought as different processes. In fact, imagination and thinking, in their psychological nature, also represented symbolic emotional processes. This unity between symbolic and emotional processes translated to a new type of psychological reality that is defined in our work as subjectivity, and this quality is what distinguishes human psychological processes from animal psychology and, at the same time, is the basis of the human cultural world. Subjectivity in our proposal is not confined to the individual (González Rey, 2002, 2015a).

Imagination is not a function or a formation in itself; it is a quality of all intellectual processes when they are subjectively configured which, based on processes such as imagination, fantasy, perception, and so on, could be integrated into a psychological unit, and it is the subjective configuration of every human function, activity and performance. The subjective configurations are organized as the result of the chaotic and endless movements of the subjective senses that characterize the human experience. The subjective senses are a mix of emotional symbolic units within which one sense replaces others and at the same time is replaced by others, in such a rapid movement that it is not perceived by the individual's consciousness. However, individuals and social instances as subjects of their functions and actions do not remain prisoners within the subjective configurations of these processes; their decisions, conscious positions and paths taken during the action are sources of new subjective senses that define the dynamic character of the subjective configurations that are organized along the course of human action. Subjectivity is an open and recursive system that is not ruled by subject consciousness given that the subject's active position is an important moment of this system in development.

Only the symbolic-emotional character of the subjective senses and the subjective configurations can embody the multiplicity of the lived experiences in each present moment of human experience. The past, present, and future of a subject's imaginary world can only be integrated at a subjective

level. The dominant psychological state defined by the ideas and emotions through which a situation is lived never results unilaterally from the current objective network of facts within which the action takes place; this psychological state is defined in the process of the subjective configuration of the action.

The subjective senses that configured themselves to define the current subjective configurations that are in process in the present, relevant, lived experience embody the subjective unfolding of experiences that occurred in a given individual's different times, spaces, and social instances of life. The lived experience that emerges is experienced by individuals and social spaces as subjective productions that have more to do with how the experience is subjectively configured than with the set of processes and objective facts within which experience occurs at the present moment. These subjective configurations do not appear at the surface of conscious psychological processes that are lived by the individual, the group, or any other social instances. Subjective senses express lived situations that are subjectively recreated and that only exist at the present moment within a subjective configuration that makes them unrecognizable.

Subjectivity is not unique to the human mind: that would be subjectivism. Subjectivity, whether among individuals or social instances, is created within cultural-historical realities; that is, humans' subjective realities exist as cultural productions. Cultural conscious devices, myths, and normative systems are always subverted by the subjective productions that are generated within them, facts that explain the historical and conflictive character of human realities. The historical character of humanity is made possible only by the necessarily relative character of human subjectivity.

This path to approaching the topic of subjectivity is at this moment a theoretical proposal that is expanding through different lines of research and is one dialectical and complex alternative that consequently advances a cultural historical proposal that integrates culture, individual, and social subjectivity in its historical recursive configurations. The "theoretical spirit" of sense, *perezživanie*, and social situation of development can be found in this proposal.

### **Some final remarks**

The concept of *perezživanie* was intrinsically associated with a new theoretical representation of the human psyche as a system at the end of Vygotsky's life. The concept of *perezživanie* was closely related with the concepts of sense and social situations of development, although Vygotsky never made explicit the relation between sense and *perezživanie*. The theoretical system that evolved in Vygotsky's mind in that final moment of his work was never made explicit.

In Soviet psychology, only Bozhovich advanced further on that unfinished legacy, which was completely overlooked by the politically dominant position of psychology at that time: Activity Theory. The concept of *perezživanie* represented the opposite of Leontiev's attempt to define psychological processes as internal activities, avoiding specifying their psychological nature as separate from the specific forms of activity with objects.

The path opened by Vygotsky at the end of his life and the advances that were made by Bozhovich and her team on that path centered on personality development and represented a starting point for advancing the topic of subjectivity from a cultural standpoint. The fact of recognizing that personality generates processes and actions independent of immediate social networks of fact is important for its generative character, which is one of the main attributes of human subjectivity.

The proposal on subjectivity that was discussed at the end of the paper is one of the possible expressions for advancing the legacy of Vygotsky and Bozhovich, making explicit the subjective character of human psychological processes, whether social or individual, as inseparable parts of the culture. Subjectivity as it is defended in this paper is not reduced to the individual mind; it is an essential quality of all of the human processes that are developed within this fictional world that we call culture.

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<sup>1</sup> Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontiev (1903-1979), contemporary of Vygotsky.

<sup>2</sup> Aleksei Alekseevich Leontiev (1936-2004), son of Aleksei Nikolaevich Leontiev.

<sup>3</sup> Original manuscript written by the author in 1937 and found in the archives of the Institute of Psychology of Moscow. It was published for the first time in 1998.

<sup>4</sup> This translation repeats the mistake of translating *perezhivanie* as experience. As result of this, we replace “experience” with “*perezhivanie*”.

<sup>5</sup> We prefer to use, in this specific quotation, the first author’s translation from Russian because the differences that were introduced in the translation from Russian to English in our opinion do not permit the appreciation of the clear emphasis posed by Vygotsky that “*perezhivanie* is expressed”, which has a different meaning from “*perezhivanie* is affected” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 294), which is how it appeared in the English translation. This difference is essential to understanding how Vygotsky himself represented *perezhivanie* as a dynamic unit that is experienced by the child here and now in the constant flux of experience.

<sup>6</sup> In the original Russian text Vygotsky uses **в единстве** which means “in unity”, but not as a unit (unit is **единица**) (Vygotsky, 1984, p. 380)

<sup>7</sup> This quotation, which was taken from the English version of one of the chapters of her book *Personality and its formation in childhood* repeats the mistake of translating *perezhivanie* as experience. As result of this, I replace experience with “*perezhivanie*”.



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