Abstract  Matusov’s article defines two trajectories in the development of Vygotsky’s academic heritage. We show that it is necessary to consider a continuous scale where the two lines of development are just polar points. We state that the problem cannot be solved in relation to Vygotsky’s theory, but requires a wider view on power relations within the world. Vygotsky’s focus on consciousness is viewed as limiting the extent of social determination of thinking by researchers in various societies. Matusov’s effort outlines the need to return to the study of consciousness.

Key Words  consciousness, cultural multi-layered personality, postmodernism, unrealized (unconscious) mechanisms

Victor Allakhverdov  
St Petersburg State University, Russia

Mikhail Ivanov  
St Petersburg Railway University, Russia

In Search of a Rational Answer to a Postmodernist Question

Eugene Matusov’s (2008) bright and engaging article sensibly points out two trajectories in the development of Vygotsky’s heritage. Both courses consider the mechanisms of interiorization—re-organization of the external social domain of action as it becomes transformed into an intra-personal domain. While one of the two courses of action outlines the impact of the social environment on personality, which in its turn emphasizes the self-value of the group’s culture, the other regards such influence as a transfer of achievements of a more advanced societal organization—such as that of a nation, or a particular social stratum—to a backward one. In the latter case, Matusov states, the existence of a positively valued model group is assumed—this is the group that idealizes its values, and condemns other groups to follow the self-proclaimed perfection of the model to the eternal delay of ‘aborigines’ acquiring the benefits of ‘civilization’.

Matusov convincingly shows that the choice of either of the paths by Vygotsky’s followers is linked to the socio-historical context of the country in which these researchers work. It is an appealing aspect of Matusov’s investigation, since scientists rarely apply their own
theories to themselves. However, while the author thoroughly investigates all the disadvantages and merits of each of these directions that Vygotsky’s followers have taken, he fails to suggest a constructive solution. Matusov clearly favors postmodernism, and thus, offers the following conclusion: ‘[W]e should push harder in presenting our partial truths to each other’s paradigm for its honest dialogic response’ (p. 28). We view this approach as unlikely to be successful.

**Too Many Truths Exist in Postmodernism**

Matusov suggests a dichotomy in interpretation of cross-cultural interactions, as he points out two trends in the development of Vygotsky’s theory. His are only the opposite points, the terminal poles in the interactions of civilizations. Each point of the continuum between the two polar points has its own truth; these intermediate points are impossible to list. What good would ‘an honest dialogic response’ do for us when we only talk about some of them? There is a range of layers where the transfer of cultural experience occurs: state, religious, military, linguistic, technological, and so forth. It also occurs through folklore, art, mythology, science, and trade. No such culture exists where the cultural transfer dominates equally in all layers. Cultures with no writing system can perfect stone axes without modern tools and, as a rule, they are better able to find healing herbs. It is not evident that technologically advanced cultures will always prevail. The fall of Ancient Rome presents a good example. Moreover, several subcultures may co-exist within one culture. The majority of Russian peasants lived according to the standards of the pre-Peter I era (1600s) until 1861: they continued to wear old-fashioned clothing, used the same outdated technology, lived in the same old houses, followed the same old traditions, and had the same old values. At the same time the culture of the Russian aristocracy drastically changed in just a mere one and a half centuries, and as one of the results produced something that is now known as ‘great Russian literature’ (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and others). The gap between these cultures within the same society of Russia was enormous. In order to overcome this breach, various myths were created. Here is the problem—by the development of which cultural layer does one judge the level of cultural development of a society in general? When the word ‘contemporary’ refers to people living under varied conditions but during the same time, we face confusion.

Moreover, when analyzing a person, we face the problem of that person belonging to various asynchronous cultural layers. Even great
scientists were not always at the top of scientific developments: Lomonossov did not accept Newton’s Theory of Gravitation, Francis Bacon knew nothing about blood circulation laws—while these laws were discovered by his physician, William Harvey. Great political leaders do not usually have great intellectual minds. It is challenging to talk about the titans of the Renaissance as people of highly moral behavior.

Perhaps, according to Matusov, representatives of Russian science (such as both authors of this commentary are) are suspected of the ‘ontological bias,’ for Russia is a country which always raced to be in Europe while rejecting it at the same time. Therefore, it can be assumed that Russian scientists sympathize with Western ideology and either are eager to embellish themselves with the goods of European civilization, thus condemning their country to eternal apprenticeship, or devote their intellectual effort to flatter their own scientific aboriginal originality. However, such a primary attitude is dubious in each case. Any personality, including that of a scientist, is autonomous enough to claim its independence. Thus, various cultural strata, various subcultures as well as personalities are able to choose various points in the continual scale constructed by Matusov: such choices have their own individual truth. What are we going to agree upon, then?

 Possibly, the Problem Lies in the Choice of Vygotskian Theory?

Some subjective truth about its creator lies behind any psychological theory. Brushing aside such positions as methodological anarchism (in the sense of Paul Feuerabend), methodological liberalism, currently popular in Russia (along the lines of Andrey Yurevich), or postmodernism, we should not value theories by the beauty of the scientist’s speech, or the theory’s originality—we should value them on the basis of their genuineness. Such a theory should be viable to verification through experience, as well as in comparison with other theories. A choice of theory cannot be accomplished only on the basis of subjective preferences. The accuracy of such a theory should be the keystone of one’s choice, even if such an approach contradicts postmodernist views.

For instance, behaviorism and Vygotsky’s theory are logically incompatible. Sometimes the opposite is being claimed—that there are no apparent contradictions between Vygotsky’s theory and behaviorism. The argument goes like this—behaviorists study acquisition of a skill, and Vygotsky’s followers study symbol operations, thus both are
involved in separate areas of research. Such an argument is erroneous. Behaviorists claim that forgetting is the result of memory trace extinction. Vygotsky views all higher psychological functions, including memory, as a consequence of social processes. Therefore, forgetting is not a physiological but a social process. So Vygotsky states that introduction of writing systems killed our memory. A.N. Leontiev’s first work on memory, supervised by Vygotsky, assumed that traces cannot be destroyed or become extinct. Pierre Janet, on the other hand, who was working within a similar framework on memory as a social event, also claimed that the past does not disappear. Hence, the memory traces either vanish, or they do not. Either Vygotsky is right, or behaviorists are right. If we choose Vygotsky’s view, it is a priori assumed that we deny behaviorist claims. Is Matusov ready to accept such a challenge?

Vygotsky was undoubtedly an outstanding scholar. Nevertheless, his ideas—relying on Marx’s doctrine in many ways—were created more than 70 years ago. Can his ideas be regarded as productive nowadays? The major problem that Vygotsky tried to solve was the problem of consciousness. Not surprisingly, his approach was in direct opposition to behaviorism. He wrote: ‘Removing consciousness from psychology, we profoundly and eternally lock ourselves into a circle of biological absurdity’ (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 81). Leontiev—who considered himself to be a student and a follower of Vygotsky—expressed a similar idea: ‘It was the existence of innate psychic phenomena in itself, the very fact of a picture of the world being represented to the subject that shaped a central enigma of human psyche’ (Leontiev, 1975, p. 24).

Marxism—to use Friedrich Engels’ idea—postulates: ‘Labor maketh the man’. Ergo, consciousness as something specifically human (the statement that should be questioned) could be shaped only through man’s labor. A.N. Leontiev, referring to Marx, explained the nature of consciousness in the following way: in the process of labor a person presupposes the result which he is striving for, set up in ideation beforehand. The image of the product of labor is called a conscious image.

Vygotsky, quoting a corresponding passage from Marx, was, nevertheless, aware of the unsatisfactory nature of this explanation. Labor is an instrumental activity. Hence, the consciousness’s activity is an instrumental activity, Vygotsky thought. However, consciousness operates with a very specific tool—symbols. Vygotsky uses the example of the development of a pointing gesture, considered to be the ancient basis of higher forms of behavior: initially, a child’s pointing
gesture is an attempt at a failing grasping behavior towards a faraway object. His/her hands stretched toward that object and remained in the air. At this point a mother comes to child’s help—‘in response to child’s grasping behavior there is a reaction not from the object the child is trying to reach but from another person’ (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 144). Gradually, the child starts to perceive his own gesture as pointing, but realizes that last. Further follows Vygotsky’s famous conclusion:

Each function in cultural development of a child emerges twice, first in a social layer, and later in the psychological layer; first, it occurs between people as a interpsychic category and then, inside a child as a intrapsychic category. (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 146)

Finally, there is a conclusion in the spirit of Marxism:

Differently from Piaget, we suppose that the development does not move toward socialization, but toward a transformation of social relation into psychological functions. It is commonly asked how one or another child behaves in a community. We ask how does the community shape higher psychological functions of that child? (Vygotsky, 1982, p. 146)

This leads us to the ontological engagement noted by Matusov. According to Matusov, we have the right to ask about a person—within which community were his or her higher mental functions formed? Was Vygotsky’s origination of ideas the result of the community’s impact on the shaping of his higher mental functions?

It is very unlikely that Vygotsky himself would have enjoyed such a question. He believed in the genuine nature of his own concepts and his conclusions independently of his moods, feelings and spontaneity of communities to which he belonged. Incidentally, Marx believed in the genuineness of his theory as well, and, as was wittily noted by Bertrand Russell (1946), Marx did not consider it as just an emotional exhibition of feelings of a middle-class German Jew living in the mid-19th century.

Whether intentionally or not, Matusov’s argument brings him into a logical trap. If Vygotsky’s theory is correct, it must be correct independently of the communal and cultural impact of the society on Vygotsky himself. However, if not everything—for instance, his own theory—depends on societal impact, then his theory turns out to be incorrect.

A contradiction, conceivably, lies at the foundation of his theory. If, according to Vygotsky, consciousness is born out of the social process, then the social must exist prior to the emergence of consciousness. This appears to be odd. Johnson-Laird (1983, p. 450) remarks that even if we accept that language and society emerged in the absence of
consciousness, then it is still unclear why people talking in their sleep would need consciousness. If interiorization is a transformation of the outer plan into the inner plan, then the inner plan (consciousness) should exist prior to the outer plan (social), otherwise the outer plan cannot be transformed into anything. If a mother gives a child a toy in response to his/her outstretched arm, then the child either already realizes the fact, and thus he should have been able to realize before his mother’s reaction, or he does not realize the events, and, hence, the fact in itself cannot lead to any kind of awareness of itself.

Vygotsky claimed that there are lower forms of mental activity (instincts, reflexes, etc.) that exist in parallel to higher mental functions that emerge out of social processes. Higher ones are necessarily based upon lower ones. Here is a question, though: is consciousness a higher or a lower mental function? Vygotsky’s texts present consciousness as a product of social processes. He emphasized that it is consciousness that makes humans different from animals. It is unlikely that he presumed that the existence of an ‘inner plan’ belongs to lower functions. If this were true, his entire theory would be diminished to a banal statement that the contents of consciousness are mainly (if not entirely) conditioned by social interactions.

**General Overview of the Problem**

The problem discussed by Matusov is widely known independently of Vygotsky’s theory. ‘Everything flows’, Heraclitus wrote. James said that consciousness streams in a continuous flow. Everything constantly changes in the world and in our consciousness, but at the same time the carrier of consciousness and the world remain themselves. A blooming and a drying rose are the same rose. Two poles—a constant and a change, tradition and innovation—describe the reality of existence. If a culture does not change, it cannot exist in the conditions of the changing world. If a culture does not keep its traditions, it ceases to exist as a culture.

This is why, in general, any unique criterion of action effectiveness becomes erroneous. In the theory of learning there exist two scores of effectiveness: *knowledge*, characterized by the volume of information attained in the learning process, and *learnability*, described as the ability of a learner to obtain new knowledge and measured by the speed of its absorption. Extreme scores of the scale become ludicrous. It is as impossible to imagine a brilliant learner who learned nothing at the end as it is impossible to imagine a learner to gain knowledge when he/she has no learnability, although these two scores do not positively
correlate with each other. Even Aristotle questioned: why do we know more when we are old, and are more easily susceptible to learning when we are younger?

Our experimental data show that unconscious mechanisms that provide consciousness with its tasks act simultaneously in two different directions. First of all, they are trying by all means possible to prove the representations that the consciousness has already formed. Psychologists often say that we see only things that we understand; in our perception the world is disfigured and transformed to a recognizable matter; anything that does not correspond to our expectations is repressed from our memory. When a person is not aware of something that he/she once failed to realize (the negative choice effect), the person consciously proceeds to make decisions whether to be or not to be aware of something. Only in such a case can a person make a decision to continue not to be aware of something that did not happen previously (Allakhverdov, 2000; Allakhverdov & Ivanov, 2006).

One of the two main life needs created by consciousness and that makes sense of a person’s existence is to prove to oneself that the world is as this person assumes it to be, and that he/she him/herself is the way that he/she perceives him/herself. It is only when these issues are proved that the person experiences true emotional content. There is, however, the second tendency as well. Consciousness is presumed to create representations adequate to the world, even if it consists of many distortions. Consciousness, nevertheless, strives (with partial success) to make its subjective representations as close to reality as possible.

Even though recently the problem of consciousness is back on the agenda, the essence of consciousness as well as its mechanisms are still unclear. The view of psychologists that portrays people as robots, when extrapolated onto either totalitarian or democratic social systems, is socially dangerous.

Culture and society must consider a human being as primarily a conscious subject. Therefore, it is important that we construe special social systems that follow two guidelines: first, they support people’s view of the world and themselves, which makes them content, if not entirely happy; and, secondly, they repair biases that these views create (i.e. make them adequate). The crisis of ideology that exists both in the West and in the East is connected to the fact that not all social institutes are built in a way that facilitates the effective work of consciousness. Thus, the problem that Matusov outlines is impossible to solve in scientific terms. We agree that societies can differ in the level of development. It is true that more developed societies can help their less developed peers. However, we do not have criteria that would allow
us to evaluate cultures on the basis of the level of the effectiveness of the work of consciousness of the people of that culture. All other criteria cannot be scientifically proved, and, therefore, they cannot be applied.

The desire of stronger societies that see themselves as more developed to force their culture onto weaker societies is dangerous. The latter never forgive the fact that their freedom has been forcefully limited. They start to accumulate strength, so that when the moment presents itself, they can humiliate the stronger society. As we know from history, forceful winners are in due course defeated. Commonly, after 20–40 years, the war victors are behind in development in comparison to the defeated. Force is sometimes justified—in the case of threats to life when urgent and decisive measures are required—but it can never solve global problems. Consequently, it should be clear that force cannot solve either problems of terrorism or extremism, or other grave issues of humanity. A victory achieved by manipulating consciousness is especially harmful. Certainly, if one starts manipulations of consciousness from early childhood, then people become used to these manipulations. This is even more menacing for it often leads to a lack of human dignity or intellectual abilities.

Summing up, we should emphasize the importance of the problem of cross-cultural interactions presented by Matusov once again. His consideration exclusively within the framework of Vygotsky’s theory limits the author’s opportunity to find a constructive solution, or show a path toward it. On the other hand, the account of conflict between two schools of Vygotsky’s followers makes it possible to establish a system of oppositions, necessary to resolve theoretical and practical collisions that characterize the relations between nations and states in modern world conditions.

References


**Biographies**

VICTOR ALLAKHVERDOV is Doctor of Psychology and Professor of St Petersburg State University. He is the President of the St Petersburg Psychological Association, Chairman of the Expert Board of the Russian Psychological Association, and the author of more than 100 publications in psychology. His specialty is cognitive psychology. ADDRESS: Prof. Viktor Allakhverdov, Faculty of Psychology of St Petersburg State University, Nabereznaya Makarova 6, St Peterburg, Russia. [email: vimiall@gmail.com]

MIKHAIL IVANOV is Doctor of Philology and Professor, as well as the Dean of the Department of Applied Psychology and Sociology of St Petersburg Railway University. He is a member of the Academy of Transport and the author of 90 publications. He is a specialist in historical and cultural psychology. ADDRESS: Prof. Mikhail Ivanov, Department of Applied Psychology and Sociology, St Petersburg Railway University, Moskovsky Prospekt 9, St Petersburg, Russia. [email: mvifp@mail.ru]