

Special section LURIA'S LEGACY IN CULTURAL-HISTORICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Editorial

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It is now more than half a century since I spent a year in Moscow as a post-doctoral fellow working under the supervision of Alexander Romanovich Luria. That experience and the 15 years during which we corresponded and organized translations have fundamentally shaped my scientific career. Simultaneously the reach and influence of Luria's ideas have continued to diffuse throughout modern scientific psychology. The following remarks are intended to suggest some of the recent accomplishments and current issues facing those who have adopted a Lurian approach, which traces its origins back to the 1920's.

In my view, the development of a cultural-historical psychology will depend greatly on the degree to which it can guide efforts at life-generating, socially sanctioned, new forms of activity in health, in education, in preparation to confront the challenges to human existence posed by human beings themselves.

Variety of Forms of Cultural Mediation of Human Activity in the Modern World

I became a professor of Communication in the late 1970's, just at the time that PCs became the focus of social attention. My prior research had focused on the role of culture in cognitive development (Cole et al., 1971). The media I had studied were oral language and literacy in West Africa and rural Mexico (a point of research and theoretical overlap between Alexander Romanovich and myself).

The central concept of Communication as a discipline is mediation. Beginning from that fundament concept allowed me to study development in relation to a wide range of media: print, telegraph, telephone, film, music, drama, and digital media (Cole, 1995). From my perspective, there have been too few uses of the cultural-historical approach to illuminate the medium-contingent nature of psychological processes in the field of Communication, psychology, and human development.

Cultural-Activity Approach as an Interdisciplinary Project

So here we encounter the need to combine the study of culture and activity in a combined way for the first time. We could spend 100% of our time on this topic and not penetrate below the surface. Here we come upon the ongoing discussion of Lev Vygotsky versus Alexey Leontiev. My own path, which opened up from interactions with my colleagues in various parts of the world, has been to take up the very problems upon which agreement in the Vygotskian school was impossible. Others have taken a similar route, and referred to the common tradition as Sociocultural Theory. At the same time in Russia, the term non-classical psychology is widely used.

From the beginning of my career I have insisted on the centrality of an interdisciplinary, problem-oriented approach in my work. At first it was necessary to integrate ethnographic anthropology and micro-sociology into my experimental, quantitative practices. In my general writings, where all four of Vygotsky's "genetic domains" are engaged, I have taken to calling an interdisciplinary, cultural-historical approach "bio-social," "cultural-historical theory" and a great deal of my time is taken up with the issues that Vygotsky and Luria tackled in the late 1920's (Vygotsky, 1978; Luria, 1928).

Psychology and Sociocultural Practices of Human Development

It is in the arena of social practice that the value of a Vygotskian-inspired Lurian psychology seems to have the greatest potential. I have used their ideas to engage in design-based intervention research as a basic methodological strategy, for the past 40 years. I have called our approach "positive critical theory." It is positive in the sense that it takes the best of accumulated knowledge and seeks to improve upon some important area of social practices (formal and informal educational practices, in my case). The critical part comes first, in the middle, and at the end of this research practice. It is critical at the outset of existing practices. It poses an alternative, that, if theory is a reliable guide, will produce the socially desired change. It turns critical in two ways at the end. First, to the extent that it is successful, yet the local community does not reorganize to adopt it, it provides a workable alternative practice in support of the children and youth who benefited. And when, after 15 or 20 years, the community abandons the activity despite its successful functioning, one becomes critical of one's community and one's own illusions about the process of cultural-historical development, both in a person and in society.

From Joint Activity to the Co-creation of Culture

I have adopted joint, mediated activity as a unit of analysis in seeking to apply my interpretation of cultural-historical psychology. Culturally mediated activity contains the idea that the forms of mediation matter, and allows us to make use of Vygotskian tools such as the dramatic metaphor. The dramatic metaphor underpinned the way in which we organized activities in the 5th Dimension after school activities (Cole, 1996; 2006; Nicolopoulou & Cole, 1993). There were assigned tasks, but there were also prominent play-inspired activities, with always a role for change and choice, always framed as a lifeworld inhabited by Wizards.

In this activity, small groups and dyads, with different participants mixing together in unpredictable ways, we observed the emergence of a distinctive, activity-specific “culture”. This “residue of the past” was made manifest in the vocabulary, the changing content of the local practices, the art created as products of the activity, as well as the emotional tone of the participants.

It is a big research problem to evaluate such systems as novel forms of activity involving children and youth. They fit more easily into the garden metaphor of culture. Like gardens, cultures are an arrangement of the environment of the focal organisms/plants/humans. The criterion of success is that they reproduce themselves adequately for human consumption. And that the meal they provide is sufficient for the human who eats them to value them.

Translated into real world terms, the innovation has been adopted (taken in), at more than one hundred such efforts by dozens of investigators. It has, in some cases, been sustained over decades. More likely by far is an activity that lasts for a few years, and then gets subsumed in a new wave of technocratic change wrought in the system of formal education. Study of such systems over years, as they multiply and die off, provides a way to move in scale of analysis from micro-genesis (the level of culturally mediated, joint activity) through ontogenesis and cultural history (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006). I have called this approach a “mesogenetic methodology”. It ranges across scales of time, seeking data about the process of learning and development as it is manifest at different temporal scales.

These are my personal thoughts on this occasion. What follows are the thoughts of my colleagues around the world who gathered to acknowledge and celebrate Alexander Romanovich’s contributions to world psychology.

The papers in this number of *Psychology in Russia: State of the Art* have been selected from presentations given at the Fifth International Luria Memorial Conference held in Yekaterinburg, Russia in October 2017. They attest to the continuing influence of Alexander Luria on the elaboration of a cultural-historical approach to the development of higher psychological functions across a wide variety of populations and forms of activity. Central to Luria’s approach was the extraordinarily broad reach and depth of his scholarship, ranging from the study of sociocultural influences on development, to the diagnosis and rehabilitation of children and adults suffering a broad spectrum of insults occurring in the central nervous systems in subjects ranging from young children to adults.

J. M. Glozman replicated and extended Luria’s study of the influence of cultural change on psychological processes of two groups of adults from a remote area of northern Kamchatka. All of the subjects had completed elementary school, but some worked as nomadic herdsman, while some lived and worked in a village. The results revealed that despite the fact they all had a modest level of education, the villagers performed better on a variety of tasks, indicating the kind of influence of social experience on cognitive functioning that Luria had reported more than 8 decades earlier.

O.V. Maslova and her colleagues report significant changes in the social values and acculturation strategies of Vietnamese students attending Russian universities. Her results demonstrate a significant shift in values toward a more materially prosperous life, depending upon gender, the type of environment (rural/urban) the individual comes from, and the strategy of acculturation they adopt.

A.S. Sultanova's research focused on the neuropsychological analysis of mental development among school-age children who had suffered neonatal hypoxia. The author reports that all of the affected children exhibited a "subcortical-frontal" neuropsychological syndrome that negatively affected a broad range of psychological functions.

P.V. Moskaleva and her colleagues studied cognitive and personality changes associated with juvenile myoclonic epilepsy (brief shock-like jerks of a muscle or group of muscles). A major finding of the study was that young adults suffering from juvenile myoclonic epilepsy suffered from a number of co-morbid personality and non-psychotic psychiatric disorders, pointing to the need for psychiatric help in addition to currently employed forms of therapy

S.V. Prokopenko and his colleagues investigated the potential of modern, interactive computer programs based on Luria's neuropsychological theories. The patients had all suffered vascular cognitive impairments. The training materials focused on computer-based tasks involving visual and spatial perception and memory, attention and impulse control. The training proved effective, as did a comparison group that played a variety of commercially available computer games.

E. Nikolaeva and A. Novikova report age differences in interactions between creativity and intelligence levels.

Y. Solovieva, based on Luria's approach to syndrome analysis, presents a case study of a 12-year-old boy who suffered severe brain trauma when hit by a bus. The author combined Luria's qualitative syndrome analysis based on the ideas of complex functional systems with P.Y. Galperin's approach to the step-by-step formation of intellectual actions. This combined method of diagnosis and rehabilitation allowed the patient to reintegrate himself into his family, participate in school and to enjoy the companionship of friends. He became more responsible and motivated to participate in all kinds of practical and intellectual activities. Negative emotions disappeared. The patient became reflexive, critical and involved in his own achievements and difficulties. Impulsive behavior disappeared. The parents have expressed positive changes in day-to-day communication.

The paper by O. Yu. Zotova, L.V. Karapetyan & I.V. Gaidamashko also study the influence of cultural change on mental functioning, namely that of globalized challenges on personal psychological security.

Taken as a whole, this set of essays confirms the effectiveness of Luria's cultural-historical approach in advancing both theoretical and practical understanding of the development of higher psychological functions.

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