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## **L.S. Vygotsky and D.B. El'konin**

### **Symbolic Mediation and Joint Action**

A conference entitled “The Scientific Works of L.S. Vygotsky and Contemporary Psychology” was held in 1981 in Moscow. D.B. El'konin expressed its core idea in the slogan: “Forward to Vygotsky!” These words were for him a call to productive reflection on the foundations of the development of the cultural-historical theory in his own works.

His last talk, given before the Science Council of the Scientific Research Institute of Abnormal Development on the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of Vygotsky's death, began as follows:

This is not the first time I have given a talk on Lev Semenovich Vygotsky, and I must say that each time I present some report on his works or on Vygotsky himself, I always experience a certain excitement, especially because I worked side by side with him, so to speak, in the last years of his life. I knew him very well, and in a certain sense even became friends with him—if one can call the relationship between teacher and pupil a friendship. But reading and rereading Lev Simonovich's works always gives me a feeling that there is something in them that I have not fully understood. I have always endeavored to find and formulate clearly the central idea that guided him from the

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very beginning of his scientific activity down to its very end. [5. Pp. 475–76]

In his analysis of [*The psychology of art*], El'konin identified in this earliest of Vygotsky's psychological writings the central idea that runs through the whole of his works. El'konin writes:

What Lev Semenovich has accomplished has profound psychological meaning: as he developed his approach to analysis of works of art, he at the same time created the foundations for a completely new, I should say, nonclassical psychology, the essence of which consists in the following: The primary forms of those structures of human consciousness that are the repositories of feelings and meaning exist objectively external to each individual: they exist in human society in the form of works of art, or in some other material creations of people, i.e., these forms exist prior to the individual or subjective structures of feeling and meaning. . . . I call this a nonclassical approach to psychology. . . . One can truly understand and evaluate Vygotsky's genuine contribution to the formulation and development of the problems associated with the role of sign and symbol systems in the genesis of human consciousness and with the definition of the content and functions of operations with signs in this process only if one fully appreciates what, precisely, this psychology entails. [5. Pp. 477–78]

The basic principle of nonclassical psychology formulated by El'konin was for him a problem as well. One of the principal themes of his diary entries in his last years was the riddle of symbolic mediation. Daniil Borisovich, following the logic of his teacher, posed the postulate of sign mediation as a problem and sought to answer the question of why and how culture becomes active, how it becomes a means for shaping behavior and thereby a means for transcending the natural forms of behavior. He wrote:

Why is a sign, in contrast to a tool, directed “inwardly” and, most importantly, how does it organize behavior? If you look at it in natural terms, there is nothing in a sign that could do this. Why do people cast lots to reach a decision or, like a kaffir, await instructions from sleep? Why does a cat's claw, a knot for, etc., organize behavior? Why do attention and indeed other processes proceed in a different way? There is the mystery!

This happens because a “sign,” which is introduced by another person, an adult, initiates the organization of the behavior [of one per-

son—B.E.] through another person. Therein lies the gist of any operation with signs: the significance of the sign lies in the function of the other person; it is the introduction of another person into the organization of a person's behavior. They may be different people (a decisionmaker, a controller, or, in general, somebody who helps or reminds the person about something). The sign is a kind of gift. A gift serves as a reminder of the giver. That is why a sign is social, and that is why it organizes behavior. A sign has the same sense and meaning in the history of culture (ritual, myth, and even religion) . . . None of the examples that he [L.S. Vygotsky—B.E.] gave in connection with the problem of the organization of behavior is interpreted and understood in this way at all! Casting lots is an appeal to another person to solve a problem. The dream of a kaffir is that someone else solve the problem for him. The main significance of the sign is social, i.e., the organization of one's own behavior through another. [5. Pp. 514–15]<sup>1</sup>

Another object of Daniil Borisovich's reflections directly related to the topic of mediation was the structure of the interpsychic form (original, "presign") form of one person's organization of another's behavior. D.B. El'konin wrote:

The problem of a joint action is the problem of the interpsychic, as Vygotsky called it. But the most important thing is the concerted action. It changes the nature of orientation. Orientation to the action of another is, at the same time, an orientation of one's own action. An orientation to material and objective conditions is subordinate to orientation to another's action (it must be uncovered).

The most important point is that a direct orientation to the real, objective conditions of an action (what A.N. Leont'ev called an operation) is included and defined in a concerted action by the orientation to another's action! I act in such and such a way in order to organize and prepare another's action. I hold a nail with one hand and with the other I hit it. But I hold it this way to make it easier to hit. Two hands are like two persons. It is the same way with the interpsychic: What implants itself in the one, implants itself in the other. [5. P. 518]<sup>2</sup>

The main idea in this quotation about a sign is that a sign is efficacious because it is, so to speak, a mark of another's active presence in one's behavior. This quotation says something about the form of this presence, namely, it is described as full coordination and commensurability of actions, i.e., that they are con-

joined in a special way. El'konin called this conjunction “concerted action.”

Perusing the short text about a concerted action, one can also discern other motifs consonant with Daniil Borisovich's famous article about object-related actions in early childhood [5. Pp. 130–41]. One of its main focuses is a criticism of the description and understanding of the genesis of an object-related action that regards it as reduplicating the properties of the object or tool. In the fragment quoted, he makes the point that “orientation to material and objective conditions is subordinate to orientation to another's action” and goes on to note: “it must be uncovered.” And indeed, following the guidelines set out by D.B. El'konin for the further development of the principal postulates of a nonclassical psychology, it is necessary to explore the idea and internal structure of a concerted action and understand how this structure is reflected in the sign.<sup>3</sup>

\* \* \*

I shall attempt an analysis of the structure of a concerted action on findings concerning the cultivation of object-related actions in early childhood. This material was chosen first because it was what prompted those reflections of El'konin's that I take as my point of departure and on which I draw. Second, how a concerted action looks will be more patently clear in this material than in material from older age groups.

Daniil Borisovich's famous article entitled [“Notes on the development of object-related actions in early childhood”] was published in 1978 [5. Pp. 130–41]. Its main thesis was that actions with objects and tools are not formed through the adaptation of movements to the properties of the tool, but through the “inclusion of the tool in the blueprint of an action (model) and its enrichment through orientation to the specific properties of the object or tool” [5. P. 137].

Also, the duplication of a model in an action does not take place directly—there is no a simple imitation:

The operational and practical aspect of an action with an object cannot be assimilated by directly accommodating the action to a model

contained either in a joint action or in a simple demonstration. It takes place in the process of a child's creating an image of an action with the object qua tool. . . . The emergence of this image marks the completion of the formation of an object-related action. [5. P. 140]

It is important that the process of a child's forming of the image of an action, like the "entire process of assimilating an object-related action, contains for the child the sense of the relations he enters into with an adult by virtue of which he will tend to follow the model of an action shown him by adults" [5. P. 140].

Thus, the genesis of an action with objects is not the direct accommodation of movements to the properties of the object, nor is it the direct accommodation of movements to a model. Somewhere between these two extremes, the child constructs an image of an action, which, according to D.B. El'konin, is formed by the incorporation of a tool into the model of an action. Comparing the content of these notes on the development of object-related actions with the ideas presented earlier on mediation and on a concerted action, one may hypothesize that the inclusion of a tool in a model in a sense is subsumed in another "incorporation" or "introduction"—the incorporation of one person's action into the action of another, in our case, the incorporation by a child of an adult's blueprint of action into his own action. It is important to note that the word *incorporation* here is not trivial, and it would be a mistake to disregard this. Moreover, it constitutes the entire gist of the matter. Simple, everyday experience tells us that by no means every adult action is assimilated by a child and incorporated into the child's action—and this despite the fact that the adult is truly the center of meaning for a child. Every parent will recall how many actions, great and small, occurred when dressing an infant, putting him on the potty, eating, etc. And, if that is the case, if there are complications, then consequently there are special conditions and even a special way for incorporating the actions of one person into the actions of another, i.e., special conditions and a special means for "finding a place" in the action of another person. A description of this way will also be an image of a concerted action.

Any action with an object or a tool (like any mediation in general) is, at the same time, a *willed nonaction*. Moreover, the inner

nature and sense of an action with objects lie in this willed nonaction. The model given by an adult does not continue the child's spontaneous and impulsive behavior: it is not incorporated into it, and it does not incorporate that behavior into itself. On the contrary, the model of an action and, consequently, an adult's action with the child's body are directly opposite to a child's spontaneous and impulsive behavior. To eat with a spoon means not to eat with one's hand, and to use the potty means not wetting one's diapers. In this particular case, acting also means willfully refraining from some other action. This necessary duality, this polarized quality of an object-related action, is reflected by the adult and by the instructions to the child: "This way, not that way," "That's a No-No," etc.<sup>4</sup>

The simultaneity of action and nonaction dictates the limits of what is contingent in the operational and practical aspects of a child's actions. Of course, the child begins to learn how to hold a spoon correctly not at the age of a year and a half, but much later; but he learns in real terms, not conditionally, to pick up his food with a spoon precisely at the age of a year and a half.

Only if a child's action is simultaneously positive and negative, i.e., is literally physically polarized, are the conditions in place that enable the *natural* forms of behavior to become cultural forms, i.e., that enable a child to master the natural, impulsive "layers" of his behavior. Only then will the mastery of object-related actions become a contributing factor in a child's *development*, not just a "cultural" add-on to his behavior.

Thus, the *critical* phase in the genesis of an object-related action is necessary since polarization of the child's corporeality and behavior is an essential moment in the formation of actions with objects and tools.

The polarization of a child's behavior also raises the theoretical problem of a concerted action and an adult's practical task in helping a child to learn actions with objects. The problem that led to the formation of the concept of a concerted action resides in the contradictory and internally polarized nature of such an action: the incorporation of the action of one person into the action of another person requires that this incorporation be in opposition to some other action. The problem is that an adult must avoid a di-

rect clash with the child, i.e., he must avoid opposing him directly, and forge a *reciprocity* in which the child in effect *counteracts* himself as he acts in concert with adults.

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An image of a concerted action cannot be fashioned by centering exclusively on the child's behavior and bracketing, so to speak, the adult's actions, especially as the latter are quite specific.

First, an adult's action is an *expressive* action. It is expressive in the first instance because it is *directed toward* the child. Such an action is a challenge. By acting, the adult, so to speak, challenges the child to act with him.

But more than this directed quality is at work here. The expressiveness of an action is dictated also by the fact that the child's body creates a movement that is important not only in itself but also as the *negation* of another movement. With his action the adult says, as it were: "Let us do just this and not that"—and, of course, this statement is registered in speech and in facial expression.

Second—and this is most important—an adult's action is expressive and is directed by virtue of its structure, which is very specific, i.e., *an adult's action is never carried through to completion: there is always some gap in it, a place where the child can step in and act in concert*. One might say that in this case the zone of proximal development is bare to the extreme and becomes a zone of proximal movement.

Thus, a successful adult's action is dual in one other aspect as well. An adult does not complete an action in principle and deliberately, but rather each time defines anew the measure of his own *nonaction*, "the point at which he will stop," slow down, or weaken movement. The weaker the adult's movement, the more expressive are his gestures and speech. This measure must be determined each time anew because the relation between an adult's action and the free space left to the child cannot be determined independently or before an action. That is why incompleteness, the relative balance between the adult's action and nonaction (pause) and the line between them is something the adult must *test*.

Only then can a concerted action in the strict sense come about; only then can a child's action be included in the adult's action with him.

Third, and finally, despite its being incomplete, an adult's action does not seem distant and "cold," and in fact it is not. On the contrary, it is very energetic and internally tense. Not only is the adult's attention always on the child but the adult is extremely interested in an action's being completed successfully. The adult will still have to dress the child, put him on his potty, and see that his porridge is eaten. As long as he does not complete the action, and as long as he is constructing his nonaction, the adult is each time struggling to overcome himself; hence, the concerted action situation is *charged with the energy* of the adult's struggling to overcome his own direct strivings and impulses.

Thus, the essence and principle of a successful adult action is its productive incompleteness—not simply incompleteness, but precisely that, productive incompleteness, for in our case the space left by the adult is a product of his action. This action is paradoxical—it is the *construction* of a pause, the *construction* of a "void" as a space (place) for the possibility of another action.

An action whose construction involves the initiation, the manifestation (appearance), and the retention of another action (behavior) may be called an open action. In successful cases the adult will construct an open action, and this will then be the means whereby the child is included in the adult's action, i.e., the means for constructing a concerted action.

The introduction of the notion of an open action enables us to define positively the concept of behavior orientation—one of the basic concepts of the cultural-historical and activity theories. Orienting actions are open actions. The important point about them is not that they are incomplete, but that they are completed by another action; and it is this, not merely their subsequent correct accomplishment, that is their objective and their product. Orienting actions are in principle actions with a living "object"—either "naturally" alive or represented as alive. An open action directed toward another person is the full form of an orienting action. All other forms of orientation are *reductions* of it.



Inasmuch as they are open actions, orienting actions are always concerted actions by virtue of their internal form: they are either included in other actions or themselves include other actions.

As for the open action of an adult, I have always added that it is a “successful case” of child–adult interaction. But what cases are considered unsuccessful, and what actions are “closed”? Well, those cases and those actions in which the adult is interested only in achieving some result, whether required by the situation or not, e.g., to put clothes on the child, to put him on the potty, to put food in his mouth, etc. Very few parents totally avoid such actions, and this is right since there are situations (of risk, of haste, etc.) in which one cannot act otherwise.

El'konin and Davydov once proposed distinguishing teaching children complete practical actions and learning actions in the strict sense [2, 5]. By analogy I propose to distinguish between the *mediating* and *concrete-results-bearing* actions of adults. This distinction is especially important in terms of child development conceived as the genesis and evolution of a system of child–adult relations. What adult and what system of relations do we have in mind? Well, the adult as middleman, who freely shapes an open, i.e., concerted, action. This *mediating*, i.e., *concerted*, *open*, action is the system of coordinates within which child development has meaning. This action is never given directly; it is by nature one that must always be found and constructed.

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To the extent that the free interval allowed by the adult approaches the point where the adult's action begins and the child's action culminates, the concerted action becomes inverted. We can now say that a child includes the adult's action in his own. Now he, the child, constructs an action that is open to the adult, literally calling him when there are difficulties and including him in his course of action.<sup>5</sup>

It is here, in the second phase of a concerted action, that an adult ceases to be a “co-actor” and becomes an “instructor”—it is here that the adult's verbal instructions begin to operate or, more

precisely, his words begin to function as instructions. One can say that it is at this moment that the sign enters into the interaction between child and adult. But what does this mean? Following the logic of genesis of a concerted action, the sign is for a child an instruction telling to what adult action the particular free interval is related.

When the sign refers to a free interval, a place for another's action, it is able to perform those of its functions of which El'konin spoke, namely, to seek an answer to the question of what effect a sign has—the function of including another in one's own action. But these meanings and this function do not arise if in the first stage a concerted action is not organized by the adult as an open action.

The idea of an open, mediating action is the connecting link between the concept of a concerted action and the concept of sign mediation. In my view, it is also the connecting link in the dialogue Daniil Borisovich El'konin had with his teacher Lev Semenovich Vygotsky—a dialogue about nonclassical psychology.

## Notes

1. Unfortunately, one phrase from this fragment is reproduced incorrectly in the [*Collected works*]. Hence, I give the text here from the original, and refer to the publication.

2. The theme of a concerted action was developed by V.P. Zinchenko [3].

3. The works of V.V. Rubtsov and his colleagues are very important for understanding the nature of a concerted action; they studied the ways that participants in collective work have to coordinate their actions and the connection between these different ways and their use of signs in the organization of their work [4].

4. The need to restrain impulses is reflected, for example, in the adult's insistent instructions that in such situations the child must ask for permission.

5. D.B. El'konin gives examples of such incorporation in his article on object-related actions [5].

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