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Becoming a person. A reflexion about the common general field for the process in normal and alterate states

Abstract

Reviewing some of the leading publications on the so called "difficult problem" of neuropsychology, the author critically compares it with the definition of consciousness proposed by Vygotskij and shared by the representatives of the Historical-cultural trend in psychology. This comparison seems, at the present day state of the research in general psychology, to give evidence of a better explaining by the latter, of the process of "becoming a person", which is impaired in most clinical cases. The foundation of this process, is argued, is a general early learning dynamic which wasn't succesfully experienced by the subject. So if Davydov was right in defining life as substantially a learning process, every intervention, wether educational or rieducational or clinical, hat to refer to this dynamic.

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Introduction

When Vygotskij[1] – the founder of the historical cultural approach in psychology - presented the problems of the psychology of human behaviour, he focused as first upon consciousness. In this contribution, one of the first by him to psychology, Consciousness as a problem of the psychology of behaviour, identified consciousness as the main problem specifically of the psychology of behaviour. As all psychologists know, this problem was not considered - at that time - as a possible object for scientific psychology, because of its not pertaining to the class of the observable variables. In giving his definition of consciousness, nonetheless, Vygotskij, looking for a new paradigm for the understanding of human cognitive processes and behavior wrote: "Human behaviour and human working activity stem from a disseminated use of the experiences of the previous generations, which are not genetically transmitted from father to child." Due to this historical component of human behaviour is the problem of consciousness that difficult to completely and adequately define. This quality generates, indeed, a discontinuity in the developmental process, between the physiological functioning underpinning living organisms and the upper psychological forms of human knowledge and behaviour. Vygotskij enjoyed using a colorite metaphor for describing the nature of the determinants of human reactions, as he called them at the starting of his conceptualization of a new theory. The subjective experiences and the corresponding behaviours, at the moment they cross the threshold of consciousness are represented as a crowd of many thousand peoples in panic, urging before a big building, with very narrow outdoors. From these doors only a few of them will cross the limit, the others will perish.

So, to him, is human conscious behaviour always the result of an analogous catastrophic struggle. This is due to the fact that human behaviour in adapting to the outer world creates by himself new events and stimuli: by means of the knowledge of others and of the experience of the previous generations. At the basis of this knowledge and of this transmission of historical experience, language is located. As many of us know, Vygotskij considered this social historical component of consciousness, tied to language, as the essential of human consciousness, though at the origin of consciousness he puts social experience as prioritarian. In his clinical writings about "Defectology" he observed that the social experience is the antecedent of the human consciousness and is the common way through which consciousness is generated in the child. The social experience generates the intention, the willing to communicate with the other, and consequently, by means of the exposure to a specific language, the linguistic form of communication is acquired. Only in the cases of native deaf and dumb children we observe the evidence, of being the social consciousness and the acquisition of language pre-disposed at the same time.[1] This reminds us to the aspect of consciousness, in which the subject's self becomes explicitly present to the same subject inasmuch as human subject. This aspect was called a "Vygotskijan consciousness by Keith Oatley"[2] and its development, as we all know, was explained by the joint- problem- solving predisposed by the adult caregivers in early infancy, as first by non verbal gestures and forms of communications, then with a growing repertoire of speech acts . These latter are as first addressed by the adults to the child, then by the child to the adults and subsequently to the child's own self as problem solver.[3]

We meet here a form of self consciousness which is generated, like in the romantic science in clinical field, conceptualised by Lurija[4] by means of a joint communication, and passes therefore, through the other. It would seem possible to state that historical cultural conception of higher psychical functions, which A.R. Lurija mutuated from Vygotskij, has elucidated the nature and the genesis of self awareness not just in the general terms of the "emergent properties of mind", but giving a concrete content to the reflective consciousness, which is causally related to the communicative and social functions of the entire human cognitive system or, to say it with a Vygotskijan term, of the interfunctional system of consciousness.[5,6] The model of self implied for by the Vygotskijan and Lurijan historical cultural conception of consciousness is therefore not just a result of a mirror reflection of the physical, bodily self, but is made up from the experience, the self has, with the physical and social world and its

content, consisting in the internalization of our perceptions of the physical effects of our actions and of the social impressions of us, that the others have and which are, verbally or non-verbally, conveyed back to us.[7] Modern neuropsychology and cognitive sciences have predisposed evidence of non verbal forms of consciousness, when subliminal stimuli are effective in facilitating subsequent perceptual and semantic judgements, as documented by Marcel,[2] or studies on neurological patients have given evidence of informations presented in a blind field of vision, due to occipital lobe damage, which can be useful in generating manual and ocular responses.[8] At the same time, studies on split brain have documented that there is more an interaction among the two hemispheres than a modular division of functions, as previously believed. Well known, studies by Gazzaniga[9] gave evidence of a capacity of the left hemisphere of naming visual information, presented as strictly lateralized to the right hemisphere, in a case of patients who underwent to surgical brain operation (a full callosal section was found). He wrote: "It is possible to show how the right hemisphere can set up a left hemisphere specific response without the left hemisphere being able to consciously access the information inserted by the right brain. In short, the findings suggest that response behaviours can be set up and carried out without conscious awareness of the elicited behaviour prior to its occurrence.[9] Finally, this evidence, as we all know, makes Gazzaniga[9] claim that: "…assessing what the brain is doing seems to be function of an interpreting module residing in the left hemisphere, or…it need not always be in the left, but that is where it is for most humans." So there are findings of modern neuroscience which claime for an "interpretive function acted upon the whole brain functioning" (by the left hemisphere). If we considered the findings of more than one classic psychological research, like the studies by Colin Cherry[10] about the dichotic acoustical experience, where we have evidence of a reconstructing of a unitary meaning from different messages sent to the two ears, or again, if we analyze the classical research by Bruner and Good now, where an organizing influence upon the basic processes of perception (perception of physical dimension), which is a form of modular aspect of consciousness, is documented by subjective elaborations, like value and need, consequently referred to as auto tone determinants of behaviour. That is to say, a central instance of personality influences an aspect of consciousness, we can conclude that in modern science of consciousness in fact a model of self is needed, in the sense exposed by Keith Oatley.[7] She claimed that what we experience as consciousness is like the phenomenologists have argued, a knowing and at the same time knowing that we know, but that this experience derives from the socially derived experience of the sense of self " as director and as part of the comparison processes of consciousness". In no case can the model for self to be though of as an homunculus. This statement reminds us to the definition for "personality", proposed by Allport,[11] as the manager, the Master controlling all the other psychical functions. It could be possible to observe, that "personality" is scarcely used by the neuroscientists and by neurologists and much more used by clinical professionals, psychologists, psychoanalists and re-habilitationists, educators. Davydov VV[12,13] the outstanding scholar who conceptualized as first school-activity (both in educational and instructional forms) mantains that the representatives of the historical cultural trend in psychology starting use the term "personality" do stress the specific human level of being "subject of the personal activity".

Analyzing these two different concepts like consciousness and personality in the context of psychological research, we find evidence of the fact that both are submitted to a developmental process. AN Leont'ev[14] observed that we do not refer to the newborn as to a personality, from a psychological point of view, though the newborn has of course to be thought as subject of human rights. Perner & Dienes,[15] by means of a survey of classical contribution in genetic psychology, as well as in neuropsychology, identified five strategies useful for determining the age, in which children attain self awareness. According to them, children acquire conscious awareness when they start a referential use of words, referring to objects or activities, at the age of 12-13 months (first words can come before, but habitually they are part of social routines). At the age indicated above, children use a word in reference to an object and control if the adult is looking at the same object. A second strategy is the focal attention to the executive control of the actions. Planning and novel action sequences are the indicators for this strategy, which refers to the so called SAS (Supervisory Attentional System, Norman & Shallice,[16] which is impaired in patients with frontal lobe insult, as documented by Lurija.[4] As observed by Piaget J,[17] this can be recognized in the following of invisible displacement of objects and in the planning of the sequence of his actions by the child, evident in the secondary circular reactions, at the age of 12 month (starting at about 10). The focal attention, which means not being willing to pay attention to a distractor when an interesting object capture the attention of the child, enters at about 16 months.

The explicit memory is the third strategy, which can be documented by the delayed imitation, commonly found around 14 months and by the memory for past events. The latter is an ability impaired in amnesic patients, which can be evidentiated in 12-15 months old child and even before. The fourth strategy refers to a second order thought, a sort of access to consciousness of a first order mental state, (which means to be conscious that we see, when we see something "there") This is connected with the concept of knowledge coming about later on, at 3-4 years, maintain Perner and Dienes[17] though there are different ways for considering the knowledge. The fifth strategy refers to a phenomenal consciousness, which is different from the access consciousness (to be conscious that something is there) since it has a reflective component, this aspect is, according to Perner and Dienes, the starting of the "hard problem"[18] defined by the scholars involved in neurological research and practice. The latter pertains to a subjective aspect of the experience and capture the subjective feel of our experiences, which is supposed not to be integrated within our scientific world view. This is a later acquisition, connected to a subjective perspective, and to the possibility of distinguishing appearance from -reality. It enters at about 4 years, though it might start before. Personality as clearly explained by A.N. Leont'ev is not a genetic endowement but the result of a later acquisition in life. This acquisition is connected with a meaningful conscious activity. As we know, the first conscious acquisition is the sensory image, or sensorial texture of consciousness according to Leont'ev, which forms and enhances the world image, as basis for consciousness. But the conscious experience of the world has to attain, according to him, the complete subjective dimension, which results in the formation of personality as subject of a productive activity. In fact to personality pertains the creation of meanings? The subjective meaning, which an activity acquires for its subject is what he defines the personal sense.

A similar conception was conceptualised by AR Lurija,[4,19] who gave evidence ,in a contribution by him which was widely ignored,[19] but which gives an account of the social determination or, to use an expression by him, of the social history of the whole process

of becoming a person. According to the last book by Lurija,[19] the clinician has to enter with his patients in a joint activity, where the most important attainment is a non- imaginary-portrait. The psychologist, or the neuropsychologist or the like, have to make up a case story, where the professional uses science not for just diagnosing a syndrome, or for simply describing the symptoms, but actively contributing to the conscious reflecting about the meaning the pathology has for the entire personality.[4] If we refer to the common way for defining the clinical rehabilitation, rieducational , psychological intervention as a first person, or a second person or a third person relation, we can observe that Lurija's approach is an encounter between the professional neuropsychologist and his patient, which stems from all these three perspectives, since we find a third person science, so far the clinician is supposed to collect and analyse data, using the objective methodologies of his science, a first- person science, so far the patient is supposed to render his narrative about the personal experience, and second-person science when the concrete (non imaginary), portrait is made up through a dialogue between the clinician and the patient, or the client, if you prefer, which is a multivoiced dialogue, involving the scientifically community and the actual state of science, the personal story of the clinician and the anamnesis as part of the personal story of the client/patient, who sketches his biographical narrative. Using the four axes carthography proposed by Varela,[20] for analysing the existing theories about subjective consciousness, it is possible to get evidence about the historical cultural perspective as different from all the indicated approaches.

It can be observed that he consideres reductionists the scholars who simply avoid the subjective experience ,claiming that it is a sort of by effect of neurobiological processes; functionalists, like Chalmers,[18] identifying the big problem with the knowledge, or like Baars B,[21] theorizing a 'global working space', or like Dennett[23] with his 'multiple versions' and the others, like Calvin W[22] with his Darwinian machines, Edelman G.[24] who generally refer the 'easy problems' of the cognitive processes to a unitary frame of reference explaining the resulting experience, the phenomenologists, among whom he puts himself, supporting a first person describtion). It can be seen that the historical cultural approach, conceptualized by LS Vygotskij and his partners and followers of different generations , attains the peculiar trait of personality, of making up subjective senses throughout the encountering social and historical projections, so that we could adapt its representation by a fifth axe. Therefore it seems it could be useful, in the accounting for the psychological clinical intervention, considering the further development of historical cultural approach to psychology, where some of the present day followers of Lurija and Vygotskij attempt at focussing upon the Subject of learning as a meaningful activity.[12,13] In effect the educational intervention, like the rehabilitative and the neuroclinical seems at the same time to imply and underpin a learning process, since it has to result in a transforming of the actual state–personality-experience.[12,13] Moving from the Vygotskijan conception of psychic development and from the AN. Leont'ev's theory of Activity, Vasilj Davydov redefined learning as a general form of human life, to say that human life is in its essential dimension the result of a transformation of the self through the others.[25] He was particularly interested in elucidating scientific knowledge, charachterizing it as a system of transformations, able of attaining the totality of interactions ,from which an event is generated. Therefore, in cooperation with the epistemologist E. Il'enkov, he defined a new thinking process, which pertains to the HOT, or to the higher order thoughts, according to the definition by Carrhuters (2000) and Rosenthal (2000), but seems to underpin the subjective consciousness of the meaning in social aspect and of the sense in the personal aspect as well.

The theoretical thinking has three main forms, which Davydov and his followers went on analysing also on an empirical base:[12,13,26–30] as first we find a meaningful analysis, as the ability of considering an event without losing its essential properties by subdividing it in parts, then planning, which is, as we found before in the genetic epistemological exposition of self consciousness, done by Perner & Dienes[15] the ability of being conscious of the strategy by which a task is solved,or to attain the image, or the model of this process and, finally, reflection, as third, the ability of mentally representing and monitoring the genetic or the causal process originating the considered problem, or task. It is also connected with an ability of anticipating imagination of whatever a behavioural process.

This process involves the whole personality, being at the same time a HOT, that is to say, a cognitive process of higher order. From this consideration, a proposal for a joint research among different professionals, stemming from all what upper exposed, seems to become perspective for more than a operational field in clinical and educational psychology and neuropsychology aswell. In the research in psychology was already found evidence, of the impairment of the upper cognitive processes by emotional states of stress. Moreover, by means of a paralleled using some of the Davydov's tests for the evaluating of the modifications, personality reflection undergoes, in different clinical psychological interventions, a sensible negative effect was evidentiated by myself and by a co-worker in clinical psychology.[31,32] Though more specifically analysis of the overall state of the research in clinical rehabilitation and neuropsychology would be needed, it is possible to propose to focus the attention upon the substantial educational and learning process, underpinning every disfunction in the behaviour of children and adult patients. As it was the case for the predisposing evidence of a successful learning, a deeper attention has to be devoted, in clinical and educational fields, to the early education, or to a possible lack and defective education and socialization for a more complete understanding of defective behaviour and subsequent adaptation.[33–37]

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Conflict of interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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