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Vygotsky's unfinished theory of child development

This material is the outcome of a dialogue with David Kellogg and Michael Cole, and I acknowledge their invaluable suggestions and criticism.

At the time of his death in 1934, Vygotsky was in the process of composing a new work on child development. Drafts of two chapters (an overview and the chapter on infancy) and stenographic records of lectures on several other topics were published in Volume 5 of his Collected Works, covering the period from birth up to the age of 3 with indications for the period up to the age of 7.

The texts are very incomplete, full of gaps and digressions and terms are undefined and inconsistent, but there is enough material to reconstruct an original conception of child development which is well worth the effort of rehabilitating.

In the excerpts from Volume 5 of Vygotsky's Collected Works quoted below, all emphasis is added by this writer.

Vygotsky sees child development as consisting of passage through a series of periods of stable development, namely, infancy, early childhood, pre-school age, school age and puberty. These periods of stable development are punctuated by periods of crisis: at birth and at the ages of 1, 3, 7, 13 and 17.

Vygotsky names these stages in terms that evidently made sense in the USSR of his day, but the periodisation essentially depended on the occurrence of specific structural transformations in the child's relation to their social environment and correspondingly in their mental life. He claimed that under different social conditions these transformations will still take place, but will happen "differently," and up to a point, presumably at different ages. For example, referring to the crisis at age 7, he says:

"Facts show that in other conditions of rearing, the crisis occurs differently. In children who go from nursery school to kindergarten, the crisis occurs differently than it does in children who go into kindergarten from the family. However, this crisis occurs in all normally proceeding child development. ..." (p. 295)

Investigation of the scope and nature of the variability of this periodisation is another much larger project. I will retain Vygotsky's terminology and make no speculations about the extent of cultural variability.

What is important in every case however, is the *concept* Vygotsky proposes for each of the structures and transformations. That child development takes place very differently in different historical circumstances, is not just a matter of empirical fact, but rather points to the need for concepts which allow us to understand the route by which cultural factors, which can be empirically determined, participate in the development of the child, thereby allowing us to understand the mechanism whereby the culture and institutions of a society are reproduced from generation to generation. The fundamental character of the structures with which Vygotsky is concerned forces us to consider that the same series of transformations may be experienced by children developing in *any* society, though in every case, they will be experienced differently, and the outcome will be different.

There are several unique concepts which Vygotsky introduces, understanding of which is the main thing to be taken from a study of this material. A quick sketch of these concepts

will now be given, and then we will run through how Vygotsky describes them in respect to each of the age levels.

The first and most important concept is the *Social Situation of Development*.

“We must admit that at the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single, and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality, mainly the social reality, that surrounds him. We call this relation the *social situation of development* at the given age. The social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual.” (p. 198)

Vygotsky conceives of the social environment in which the child finds itself and the relationship of the child to other people, not just in an abstract general way, as influence or resource or context or community, but concretely as a *predicament*.

The child begins life utterly helpless; even the cortex of the brain does not yet function sufficiently well to perceive the figure of objects or people, or even the child’s own body, with respect to its background; the child is unable to contribute to meeting or even determining any of its own needs. At the end of the process, if each of the periods of stable development and crises have been successfully negotiated, the child has become a fully mature member of the wider society, able to determine and meet their own needs in a manner consonant with their social position, aware of other possible social positions, taking moral responsibility for their actions, and participating in the reproduction of the culture and institutions of the society.

At each successive stage in the child’s development the child becomes able to perceive that the very situation through which their vital needs are being met, has *ensnared* them in a trap from which the child can only *emancipate* herself by *striving* in just such a way as to *stretch* the capacities that they have at the given stage of development. In the case of a stable period of development, this striving brings that central function to maturity and makes the social situation of development redundant, bringing into being a new predicament. In the case of the periods of crisis, with its striving the child’s forcibly breaks from the predicament and opens the way directly to a new period of stable development in a new mode of behaviour and interaction.

The predicament is therefore contained in the way the child’s needs are being met through the adults related to the child, which lock the child into certain modes of activity which they are capable of sensing as a limitation, and even come to see as a kind of insult, the transcendence of which becomes need and a drive in its own right; but they are not yet capable of transcending that limitation, and their efforts to do so are frustrated. The mode of activity through which the child’s needs are being met is created in response, on one side, to the expectations the adults have of the child, and the resources they have available, acquired from the culture, and on the other side, to the child’s behaviour and age (institutional and other norms may impose age level expectations on the child irrespective of the child’s actual level of functioning), according to the child’s capacities.

This contradiction between the supportive constraints imposed on the child and the child’s inability to break free from them, causes the child to strive to emancipate herself

from this social situation and development arises from this striving, provided that the adults around the child are also capable of entering into a new mode of interaction with the child. This contradiction generates a striving only because the child perceives the situation as a constraint and strives to overcome it, and thus by implication, the overcoming of these constraints which fall within the child's capacity to intuit, is also a key *need* of the child, a drive which is not facilitated, but *frustrated* by the social situation which created it. If the child does not feel a need to overcome these constraints on the determination and satisfaction of their own vital needs, or does not strive to overcome these constraints and emancipate itself, then a pathological situation exists and the child will not develop.

Thus we have an abstract definition of the social situation of development which tells us how to understand the infinity of relationships around the child so as to grasp concretely how the social environment determines and affords development of the child. As an abstract concept, simply the predicament of a *gap between the child's manifest needs and the social means of their satisfaction*. This way of conceiving of the social situation of development is *universal*, but in every single case the situation is different because the adults providing for the child's needs do so differently in different cultural circumstances, and have different expectations of the child and will react differently to the child's behaviour, not to mention the indeterminate impact of differences in the diet and physical conditions of existence that the adults provide for the child. For example, the infant may grasp for her mother's breast, but the mother may or may not respond; the child's predicament is the same, but the outcome is different. Actualisation of the social situation of development is different in every different social and historical situation, and the course of development is different in each case. In that sense, development is culturally determined. But in each case, in understanding the factors determining the course of development, we will look at this contradiction between the level of the child's development more or less corresponding to the manner in which the child's needs are being met, and the constraints this mode of interaction imposes on the child, insofar as the child is capable, at the relevant stage of development, of intuiting those constraints and despite frustration, strives to overcome them.

Neoformation. This rather strange word is used by Vygotsky to mean a psychological function, or more precisely a mode of interaction with the child's social environment including a specific mode of mental activity implied in the given type of social interaction in the given social situation. A neoformation is so-called and is immanently determined because it newly appears at a specific stage of the child's development, differentiating itself from other functions and enabling a new mode of social interaction.

Each age-level of development of the child is characterised by a social situation, with the specific predicament of being at just that stage of development, and one neoformation above all others, plays the leading role in restructuring the mental life of the child, which Vygotsky calls the ***central neoformation***.

In the case of stable periods of development, the central neoformation gradually differentiates itself in the first phase of the period, and then in the later period, drives the restructuring of the child's behaviour and eventually makes the social situation of development redundant by overcoming the former constraints, generating new modes of interaction and setting up a new predicament. The central neoformation does not

disappear, but continues to develop and play its part in the child's activity, but no longer plays the central driving role in development.

“These neoformations that characterize the reconstruction of the conscious personality of the child in the first place are not a prerequisite but a result or product of development of the age level. The change in the child's consciousness arises on a certain base specific to the given age, the forms of his social existence. This is why maturation of neoformations never pertains to the beginning, but always to the end of the given age level.” (p. 198)

In the case of periods of *critical* development, the central neoformation forces a break from the old relationships and lays the foundation for a new social situation of development but it is transient, and in the normal course of development it fades away and will reappear later only under extreme conditions. These are called *transitional neoformations*.

“The most essential content of development at the critical ages consists of the appearance of neoformations which ... are unique and specific to a high degree. Their main difference from neoformations of stable ages is that they have a transitional character. This means that in the future, they will not be preserved in the form in which they appear at the critical period and will not enter as a requisite component into the integral structure of the future personality. They die off, ...” (pp. 194-5)

Lines of Development. In its development from a helpless newborn to a mature and responsible young adult, the child must pass through a series of age levels, each of which constitute a viable form of social practice or *Gestalt*. At each point in this development, the child is able to utilise only those neoformations which have been developed so far, pulling herself up by her own bootstraps, so to speak. Each chapter in this story involves transformation of the mental life and mode of interaction of the child from one whole, viable form of life to another. Thus at each age-level there is a *main line of development* which is the narrative of how the central neoformation of the age level differentiates itself from the psychic structure and brings about a new constellation of psychological functions, transforms the relationship between functions, stimulates the development of others, while suppressing still others, transforming cause into effect and effect into cause, turning means into ends and ends into means. The main line of development in each age level is driven by the requirements of development of the central neoformation. But, at the same time, *peripheral lines of development*, subplots so to speak, continue, sometimes in support of the main lines of development, other times continuing the work begun in previous age levels, refining and strengthening functions which are no longer the driving force of development. The central line of development is the story of how the child overcomes the predicament contained in the social situation of development and leads into a new predicament, and how the central neoformation restructures the mental life of the child and their relationship to the social environment.

“... at each given age level, we always find a central neoformation seemingly leading the whole process of development and characterizing the reconstruction of the whole personality of the child on a new base. Around the basic or central neoformation of the given age are grouped all the other *partial neoformations* pertaining to separate aspects of the child's personality and the processes of development connected with the neoformations of preceding age levels. The processes of development that are more or less directly connected with the basic neoformation we shall call *central lines of development* at the given age and all other partial processes and changes occurring at the given age, we shall call *peripheral lines of development*. It is understood that processes

that are central lines of development at one age become peripheral lines of development at the following age, ..." (p. 197)

Thus the *age levels* are characterised by the specific mode of interaction which arises on the basis of the social situation thanks to the central neoformation which moves to the fore in the given age period along the main line of development for that age period. Since each of the phases of development entail biological changes in the organism as well as institutional expectations taking account of historical experiences of the society, the age levels do implicate regular years of age, but they are defined not by age, but by the central neoformation of development in the age level.

Stable age levels are periods during which a central neoformation grows takes up a central role in development in and through its becoming a mature and continuing part of the child's psyche. In *critical age periods*, the child forcibly breaks from the former social situation of development by the somewhat premature exercise of increasingly developed forms of wilfulness, manifested in forms of *negativism*.

"This is what people have in mind primarily when they speak of the negative character of the critical age levels. By this, they mean to express the idea that development seems to change its positive, creative significance, causing the observer to characterize such periods predominantly from unfavorable, negative aspects." (pp. 192)

These forms of negativism, which rests on the child's striving despite everything to overcome the frustration of their drive and do that which they cannot do, disrupt the former relations and open up conditions for a new period of stable development, in which the negativism of the critical period has to be let go.

Vygotsky says that during the periods of stable development, the changes in the single neoformations drive the development of the whole, but during the critical periods of development, it is the change in the whole structure of the psyche which determines the changes in the separate neoformations and relations between them.

"At each given age period, development occurs in such a way that separate aspects of the child's personality change and as a result of this, there is a reconstruction of the personality as a whole - in development [i.e., during the critical periods] there is just exactly a reverse dependence: the child's personality changes as a whole in its internal structure and the movement of each of its parts is determined by the laws of change of this whole." (pp. 196)

With this introduction to the concepts Vygotsky will use, we will now go through the age levels up the crisis at age 7, and then give a quick overview of how Vygotsky saw each of the crisis periods, and we will offer extensive excerpts from Volume 5 of Vygotsky's Collected Works to illustrate his views.

Vygotsky's description of the age levels

The Crisis of the new born.

The few weeks after birth is the first crisis period, marked by emergence from the womb and the construction of the first preconditions for a human, that is to say, a social life, viz., the ability to distinguish a figure from the background so as to be able to respond to other people. The establishment of a life outside the mother's body leaves the newborn in the predicament of being utterly dependent on others, whilst being unable to contribute in any way to the meeting of their own needs.

“the child separates physically from the mother, but because of a number of circumstances, biological separation from the mother does not quite occur at that moment. In basic vital functions, the child remains a biologically dependent being for a long time. ... the principal feature of the age ... is rooted in that unique situation of development that is created by the fact that the child at the moment of birth separates from the mother physically but not biologically.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 207)

The mental life of the newborn is of a form which will disappear into the background once the preconditions for infancy are created:

“The mental life of the newborn has all the typical traits of neoformations of the critical ages. As we indicated, neoformations of this type never result in mature formations, but are transitional formations that disappear into the following stable age. What kind then is the neoformation in the newborn period? It is a unique mental life connected predominantly with subcortical sections of the brain. It is not retained as such as a stable acquisition of the child for the subsequent years. It blooms and fades in the narrow time limits that encompass the newborn stage. However, it does not disappear without a trace as a momentary episode of child development. In the subsequent course of development, it loses only its independent existence and enters as a component part, a subordinate unit, into the nervous and mental formations of a higher order.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 214)

This unqualified dependence without any means to even perceive another person is the predicament from which the child can only extricate itself by developing its subcortical brain.

“If we try to name in general terms the central and basic neoformation of the newborn period that first arises as a product of that unique stage of development ... we might say that this neoformation will be the individual mental life of the newborn. ... What is new that appears during the newborn period is that this life becomes individual existence separate from the organism within which it was conceived, a life that, like every individual life of man, is interwoven and involved in social life of the people around the child. This is the first point. The second point is that this individual life, being the first and most primitive form of existence of the child as a social existence, is also mental life because only mental life can be part of social life.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 211)

This crisis period comes to an end when the newborn begins to be able to respond to stimuli from other people, thus opening up the possibility for interaction with other people, and with this the child enters a new, stable period of development, *infancy*.

“Long before he exhibits the ability to react to separately perceived, articulated elements of a situation, begins to react to intricate, complex, emotionally coloured wholes. ... initially amorphous perception of the situation as a whole consists of a background against which a more or less defined and structured scene is isolated for the child, and he perceives this as a special quality against the background. The law of structure or separating figure and background is evidently the most primitive feature of mental life that forms the departure point for further development of consciousness.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 213)

In summary, the subcortical brain provides the child with a mental life and a means of surviving outside the womb still biologically dependent on the mother. The neonate has only *reflexes* such as breathing and sucking which are in no sense voluntary. Departure from reliance on this subcortical, ‘old’ brain and the beginning of infancy demands the development of perception up to the point of being able to distinguish a figure from its background, which is the route along which the child’s social relations may arise.

Summary of the Crisis of the newborn (birth to about one month)

Social Situation of Development	Central Neoformation	Central. Line of Development
<i>Physically</i> separated from the mother, while still <i>biologically</i> dependent and unable to contribute to meeting its own needs at all.	Diffuse consciousness connected with <i>subcortical</i> regions of brain.	From beginning of mental life up to ability to respond to stimuli from other people.

Infancy (2-12 months)

The infant remains utterly dependent on the adults around her to meet her needs, and yet she lacks the most crucial means of communication, speech and language generally, and psychologically is not even able to differentiate herself from other people, still less *communicate* with others.

“at the infancy stage, we find completely specific, most unique sociability in the infant which is based on the single and unique **social situation of development** that depends on two basic points. The first consists of the totality of features of the infant, apparent at first glance, which can usually be described as his **complete biological helplessness**. The infant cannot himself satisfy even one vital need. The most elementary and basic vital needs of the infant can be satisfied in no other way than *with the help of adults*. The path through others, through adults, is the basic path of the child’s activity at this age. Definitely everything in the behaviour of the infant is intertwined and interwoven into the sociable. Such is the objective situation of his development.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 215)

In order to emancipate herself from this predicament the child’s response is to build up the physical strength and coordination to use ‘tools’ which will give her the physical and psychological capacity to have her needs met by adults through the use of gestures and language.

“This manipulation of immobile objects with the help of moving objects, this action of one object on another, this change in the form of an object and rudiments of positive formation may justifiably be considered as a preliminary stage for the development of instrumental thinking. All of this leads to the simplest use of tools. The use of tools creates a new period for the child.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 229)

Development of these abilities create the conditions to explore the limits of their field of perception and learn the limits of their own body, while at the same time preparing for the move to the use of gestures and language. During the latter stages of infancy, from simply being receptive, the child “takes an active interest in the environment.”

“Describing the higher social development of the child, ... on the one hand, the energy factor that more or less determines the potentials of activity of the child is the basic prerequisite for the development of his social manifestations and communication with adults. Thus, the genesis of the basic neoformation has very deep roots, in the most intimate internal processes of organic growth and maturation. On the other hand, **the social situation of development that is created by the infant’s helplessness** determines the direction in which the activity of the infant is realised, the direction towards objects of the surrounding world through another person. ...

“In the course of development, the infant’s activity increases, his energy supply increases, his movements are improved, his hands and feet grow stronger, new, younger and higher sections of the brain mature, and new forms of behaviour and new forms of dealing with

the environment develop. Because of all of this, the circle of his relations to reality is extended and, consequently, his making use of the path through an adult becomes broader and more varied, but on the other hand, there is a heightened **basic contradiction between the increased complexity and variety of social relations of the child and the impossibility of verbal communication**. All of this cannot but lead to a situation in which the basic neoformation of the newborn period - instinctive mental life - changes in a most decisive and radical way. It is very easy to understand the change if we take into account two basic features that distinguish the mentality of the newborn: first, the child does not yet separate not only himself, but also other people from the merged situation that develops on the basis of his instinctive needs; second, for the child there is still nothing and no one at this period; more likely, he experiences states rather than specific objective content. Both of these features disappear in the neoformation of infancy.

“The neoformation can be determined if we take into account the basic direction which the infant's development is taking. As we have seen, this direction consists in that only one path to the external world is open to the child's activity - the path that lies through another person. It is completely natural for this reason to expect that in the experience of the infant, his mutual activity with another person in a concrete situation must be differentiated, isolated, and formed first of all. It is natural to expect that the infant in his consciousness has not yet separated himself from his mother.

“If the child is physically separated from the mother at the moment of birth, then biologically, he does not separate from her until the very end of infancy as long as he does not learn to walk by himself, and his psychological **emancipation** from the mother, separating himself from initial communication with her, usually occurs only outside the limits of infancy, in early childhood. For this reason, the **basic neoformations of infancy** may best of all be designated by the term introduced in German literature as a name for the initially appearing mental commonality of the infant and the mother, a communication that serves as the point of departure for further development of consciousness. First, what arises in the consciousness of the infant may be termed most precisely as "**Ur-wir**," that is, "proto-we". This initial consciousness of mental commonality which precedes the development of consciousness of his own personality (that is, consciousness of a differentiated and separated "I") is a consciousness of "we," but not the mobile, complex consciousness of "we" that includes the "I," the consciousness that appears when the child is older. This initial "we" relates to the later "we" as an ancestor to a descendant.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 232)

Summary of the Period of Infancy (1-12 month)

Social Situation of Development	Central Neoformation	Central. Line of Development
The immobile infant is dependent on adults to meet their every need.	Increased energy and motor-control to actively deal with the external world.	From passive instinct via conditioned reflex to intelligent interest in world and use of tools.

Crisis at age 1

The passage from infancy to early childhood around the age of 12 months, involves a number of transitional neoformations which complicates the study of this crisis period. During the latter stages of infancy the child:

“takes an active interest in the environment. Finally, the conclusion of infancy directly confronts us with the one-year crisis, which, like all critical age levels, is characterised by vigorous development of affective life and is marked by the first manifestation by the child of the affect of his own personality - the first stage in the development of the child’s will.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 227)

The transition from crawling to ‘walking’, the transition from crying and laughing to ‘talking’ and the first protests and attempts to develop its own will, coincide:

“In early childhood, the child is already walking: poorly, with difficulty, but nevertheless it is a child for whom walking has become the basic form of moving through space.

“Establishment of walking is the first point in the content of [the one year] crisis.

“The second point refers to speech. Here again, we have a process in development where we cannot say whether the child is or is not talking, when speech is and is not. This process too is not completed in a day, although cases have been described in which a child started speaking instantly. Here too, we have a latent period of establishing speech which lasts approximately three months.

“The third point pertains to the aspect of affect and will. ... the child makes his first acts of protest, opposition, standing up to others, “uncontrollability” in the language of familial authoritarian rearing.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 243)

Vygotsky continues:

“When does a normal child go through a period of autonomous speech? We said that he does so in the crisis of the first year of life, that is, at the turning point when the child passes from infancy to early childhood. This usually begins at the end of the first year and ends in the second year. During the crisis of the first year of life, the normal child uses autonomous speech. Its beginning and end signify the beginning and end of the crisis of the first year of life.

“Does this mean that we consider children’s autonomous speech as a central neoformation of the critical age? It seems so to me. But this point of view is insufficiently developed, and for this reason it will be necessary to be very careful about reaching conclusions about the nature of the neoformations of one critical age or another. In any case, the appearance of children’s autonomous speech as a transitional form from the mute to the verbal one is one of the most important facts.

“We have seen two other factors in the crisis: the establishment of walking and hypobulic and affective outbursts of the child, etc., but, of course, the task is always not in matching a number of neoformations with this, but in finding their central methods. Of course, it is important to understand neoformations from the point of view of that whole which occurs in the growth that signifies a new stage in development and the structure of all the new changes.’ (LSV CW vol 5, p. 256-7)

But Vygotsky decides that the central neoformation of this period is autonomous speech, the necessary precursor to the use of ‘our’ speech:

“I think that the child’s development considered from the point of view of stages in the development of the personality, from the point of view of the child’s relations with his environment, from the point of view of the basic activity at each stage is closely connected with the history of development of the child’s consciousness. If I would want to answer this question formally, I might indicate the famous words of Marx that ‘consciousness is the relation to the environment’. But essentially, it is true that the relation of the personality to the environment characterises in the most intimate way the structure of consciousness and, consequently, it seems to me that studying the age levels and their neoformations from the point of view of consciousness is a legitimate approach

to a correct answer to this question. And the advantage here is no small thing because contemporary science still does not know how to study facts that characterise consciousness. There is no doubt that speech is closely connected with consciousness. I do not want to make a mistake and, in pointing to the relation to the environment, to consciousness, to speech, I do not want to reduce everything to speech. Of course, I must proceed from both the top and the bottom, from such symptoms as teeth, walking, and the child's speech; I must be interested in the first and second actors in this drama. It seems to me that the study of changes in the child's consciousness and the study of speech is theoretically central to understanding all the other changes which concern us here. ...

"In children's autonomous speech, we find various forms typical for the crisis of the first year. The beginning of this form and the end of children's [autonomous] speech may be considered as a symptom of the beginning and end of the critical age.

"True speech arises and autonomous speech disappears together with the end of the critical age; although a feature of the acquisition of these critical ages is their transitional character, they have a very great genetic significance: they are seemingly a transitional bridge. Without the formation of autonomous speech, the child would never make the transition from the mute to the verbal period of development. Properly, the acquisition of critical age levels is not destroyed but is only transformed into a more complex formation. It fulfils a specific genetic function in the transition from one stage of development to another." (LSV CW vol 5, p. 258-9)

The point is that up until this crisis period, the child has been excluded from participation in meeting of their own needs mainly by the lack of language. Lacking *all* the faculties necessary for speech, the child has to make a start, and lacking both a vocabulary and vocal skills, she simply makes up words or freely improvises indicative meanings from words or partial words she has picked. The other developments during this transition period represent solutions to the same predicament of being unable to actively participate in determination and meeting their own needs; in the stumbling, half-walk/half crawl types of locomotion the child uses in transition to walking, they are less mobile and less secure than when they just crawled, but they nonetheless make the transition. Both autonomous speech and the earliest forms of walking presuppose and independence of will which is capable of overcoming the lack of facility. The child has to speak despite the fact that she can't speak, and walk even though she can't walk. This is the social situation of development. The central line of development is to make a beginning at speech, but the uncontrollability and stumbling are important secondary lines of development that arise out of the same social situation of development.

As the accomplishments of a transitional period, it is normal that this insistence on independent action without the necessary facility is something that is terminated once facility in walking and talking is attained.

Crisis at age 1 (uncontrollable, autonomous speech)

Social Situation of Development	Central Neoformation	Central. Line of Development
Mute and immobile, despite the lack of skill, the child must make a start with speech and walking.	The first manifestation of own personality, and development of own will.	from mute to baby-talk, from crawling to stumbling, beginning to participate. (ur-wir)

Early childhood (1-3 yo)

The central line of development in early childhood is the development of self-consciousness.

“What are the principal traits that characterise the child’s behaviour [in relation to external reality]? I will indicate the more important traits graphically, This is the *Situationsgebundtheit* and *Feldmassigkeit*, that is, a connectedness of the situation itself. The child enters into the situation and his behaviour is wholly determined by the situation, he enters it as some dynamic part of it. And as *Feldmassigkeit*, Lewin has in mind any situation that structural psychology regards as a field of human action ... each object [in the child perceptual field] has a seeming affect attracting or repelling, that arouses motivation in the child.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 261)

The development of self-consciousness marks the age period of early childhood into two phases, of “proto-we” and “I”:

“... two stages into which early childhood can be divided can be set apart in the following way. The first stage “Ur-wir” is a “proto-we” consciousness that precedes the concept “I” and from which the “I” is extracted.. Actually, a number of facts show that the child takes no account of what *he* understands and what *others* understand, ... to the child, it seems that adults know his every wish. ... The very expression “I myself” appears in the second stage of early childhood. Authors call the second stage the ‘stage of the external “I” in the “we”, and this is the stage in which the child opposes his independent actions to cooperative actions with adults.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 266)

This change in the relationship to those around her is driven by the development of speech.

“Turning to the neoformations, which we considered in detail with speech, we see that the very fact of acquiring speech is in sharp contradiction to everything of which I spoke thus far that characterises early childhood. In other words, **speech instantly starts to shatter sensori-motor unity and to break up the situational connectedness of the child.** As the child develops, this relation changes not only to the new, but to the old elements of the environment because the nature of their effect on the child changes. There is a change in the **social situation of development** that prevails at the beginning of this age. Suddenly, the child becomes entirely different - the old social situation of development is destroyed and a new age level begins.

“We can understand what is new in the relations of the child to the environment in early childhood in light of the analysis of the development of children’s speech because the development of speech as a means of personal contact, as a means of understanding the speech of those around him is the central line of development of the child of this age and essentially changes the relations of the child to the environment.

“A study of deaf-mute children shows that **the central neoformation - speech as a communicative function** - does not develop in them.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 268)

Speech changes the nature of perception and its place in the whole psychological structure, including the ability, which emerges in the latter phase, to differentiate internal and external experience. The development of speech as a communicative function in the latter stage, is the central neoformation, arising from the social situation of development.

“*Perception of meaning* develops not from further development of purely structural qualities, but is in a direct connection with speech and is *impossible outside speech*.”

“For early childhood, such an interrelation of separate functions is characteristic so that *affectively coloured perception is dominant* and is at the centre of the structure, and *all other functions of consciousness operate around it*, leading through affect to action. ...

“[Initially, a]ll of the child’s speech at this age is completely unconscious. The child speaks, but is not conscious of how he speaks, is not conscious of the process itself, and does not know how to select words, ...

“How does the child perceive the external world and act on it? *Perception is the basic function of this age and matures early*. Most important changes in perception occur at this time; it is differentiated from internal experiences, ... The general law of mental development says that the functions that are dominant at this age are in the most favourable conditions. This explains all the changes in perception that occur.

“The most essential is the interrelation of meaning and systemic structure of consciousness. The dominance of perception implies a certain nonindependence, a certain dependence, of all other functions on perception. ...

“*The systemic structure of consciousness* elucidates the development of a constant picture of the word. The categorising quality of perception, perception of an object as a representative of a group of objects, is the second feature, the feature of generalisation. ...

“The systemic structure of consciousness casts light also on perception of reality, on activity in it, and on relation to oneself. By age three, the child also controls affect, the **old social situation of development is inadequate, the child enters the crisis of the third year** and a new situation in personal contact is created.

“I am inclined to consider the appearance of systemic consciousness, of which I spoke, as a central, characteristic factor in consciousness since specifically for man it is essential that he not simply perceive, but interpret the world, and his consciousness always moves in the plane of something interpreted.

“To say that man acts consciously and deliberately is not one and the same thing. For me, this is the basis for proposing that the **central neoformation** of early childhood is specifically the **development of consciousness** in the true sense of the word. I think that here for the first time we are definitely confronted by consciousness and those characteristic factors in it that distinguish man from the mental life of animals and from the mental states of man that are not fully conscious and developed. I could recall the words of K. Marx regarding consciousness and its connection with speech not to confirm this point of view, but to introduce a broader theoretical understanding into the context. The aspect of consciousness that Marx had in mind when he calls *language practical consciousness, consciousness that exists for others and is meaningful for me* - this consciousness itself that he calls a historical product - actually appears together with speech, that is, in any case, when the child begins to interpret in speech both objects and his own activity, when *conscious contact with others, not that direct social connection of infancy*, is possible. ...

“In conclusion, I will allow myself to say that since *a differentiated system of separate functions first arises in a given structure*, the centre of which is **perception**, and since *the basis of perception is generalisation*, objectively we are dealing with the appearance of the very basic features of human consciousness, and this must be considered as one of the neoformations that first arise at this age.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 278-281)

Initially, the child has no consciousness of themselves separately from the adult carers; close intercourse with the adults demands a mastery of language, which is the central neoformation, but mastery of language brings about a revolution in perception, including the perception of the self as a distinct person; this transforms consciousness and demands

a transformation of the relationships on the basis of recognition of the child's own will and identity. The development of speech, perception, memory, use of objects are all closely connected lines of development, but it is the development of speech as a communicative function which changes perception to meaningful perception and facilitates the use of memory to aid perception, and leads the whole process.

Early childhood (1-3 yo, emergent personality)

Social Situation of Development	Central Neoformation	Central. Line of Development
Needs are determined and met by adults, but he has not mastered language.	speech	from "ur-wir" of infancy to "Ich," from unconscious to communicative speech

Crisis at age 3

Vygotsky says that there are seven symptoms of the crisis at age 3: negativism, stubbornness, obstinacy, wilfulness, protest-rebellion, devaluation (disgusting behaviour such as cursing) and in the case of sole children, despotism. Vygotsky begins with negativism:

"the first symptom, which characterises the onset of the crisis, is the development of *negativism*. ... In negativism, all of the child's behaviour goes contrary to what adults require of him. If the child does not want to do something, because it is unpleasant for him., this is not negativism. The child wants to do something which attracts him, for which these is a drive, but he is forbidden to do it; if he does it anyway, this would not be negativism. This would be an act of refusing to acquiesce to the demand of the adults, a reaction that is motivated by the strong wish of the child.

"As negativism, we will consider such manifestations in the behaviour of the child when he does not want to do something only because an adult told him to, what is, the reaction is not a reaction to the content of an action, but only to the request of adults. As a distinguishing mark from ordinary disobedience, negativism consists in the fact that the child *does not do something because he was asked to.*" (p. 283)

This negativism is the first manifestation of the child's capacity to act *other than* how she feels like acting, of a differentiation between action and affect, and this differentiation is mediated by the relation of the child to her carers:

"The drive to contradict, the drive to do the opposite of what he is asked to do, is negativism in the true sense of the word. A negative reaction differs from ordinary disobedience in two essential points. First, in this case, *social relations*, relations to another person, are at the forefront. ... The second essential point is the new relation of the child to his own affect. The child does not act directly under the influence of the affect, but acts counter to his tendency ... the motive is outside the given [i.e., immediate] situation." (p. 284)

Which symptoms are manifested and how, depends on the conditions and style of rearing, but Vygotsky regards the first four (negativism, stubbornness, obstinacy and wilfulness) as the most common.

"The second point: if a social tendency is characteristic for negativism, that is, if the child does something contrary to what adults tell him then in stubbornness, the characteristic tendency is *toward himself*. ... he does so only because *he said so* and he sticks to what he said. ... Obstinacy is more apt to be directed against norms of rearing established for the

child, against the way of life, ... willfulness or 'self-will', consists of a tendency of the child towards independence ... Now the child wants to do everything himself. ... ” (p. 285)

So in this crisis, there is a more developed manifestation of self-relation by the child, which radically changes the whole relationship of the child to all those around her, signalling that the social situation of development in early childhood is now outgrown:

“These are the basic symptoms that colour the descriptions of the crisis at age three. Considering these symptoms, it is easy to see that the crisis is manifested mainly in traits that make it possible to recognise in it a kind of rebellion against authoritarian rearing, and it is a kind of protest by the child who wants independence, who has outgrown the norms and form of care that obtained in early childhood. In its typical symptoms, the crisis has such an obvious character of revolt against the care-giver that this strikes all investigators. (p. 286)

The child forcibly breaks out of the relations in which he is controlled by others, but in order to emancipate herself from the control of the adults, the child must first emancipate herself from control by their own desires which are manipulated by the adults. The child does not yet control their own affect, so the first step is to bring their actions under the control of their own will, thereby bringing that same will into objective existence, freed and differentiated from what the child 'feels like doing'.

“In early childhood, the child is a being who is always under the control of direct, affective relations with those around him to whom he is related. In the crisis at age three, something happens that is called division into two: conflicts can occur here, the child may abuse his mother and may break toys in anger if they are given to him at a bad time; there is a change in the affective-volitional sphere that indicates independence and activity of the child. All the symptoms develop around the axis 'I' and the people around him. These symptoms indicate that the relations of the child to people around him or to his own personality are changing. In general, the symptoms taken together create the impression of emancipation of the child: it is as if adults led him by the hand before, but now he has developed a tendency to walk independently. ... In early childhood, the child is separated biologically, but psychologically he is still not separated from the people around him. ... during the crisis at age three, we are dealing with a new stage of **emancipation**.” (p. 286)

By bringing their own activity under the control of their own will the child utterly reconstructs relations with its care-givers, even though they are not yet able to bring their will under rational, intelligent control.

“In reviewing the symptoms of the age-three crisis, ... an internal reconstruction occurs along the axis of social relations. ... What is essentially restructured during the crisis? The **social position of the child with respect to the people around him** and to the authority of the mother and father. There is also a crisis of the personality - of the 'I', that is, a series of acts takes place, the motive for which is connected with the development of the child's personality and not with given, instantaneous desire; *motive is differentiated from the situation*. To put it more simply, the crisis occurs along the axis of a reconstruction of social interrelations of the child's personality and the people around him” (p. 288)

By freeing their activity from the control of direct affect the child opens up the opportunity for the development of intelligence, and thereby rational control of their own behaviour.

Crisis at age 3 (despotism, negativity)

Social Situation of Development	Central Neoformation	Central. Line of Development
The child is denied recognition as an independent person with their own will.	Ability to act <i>contrary to inclination</i> (desire, direction, interest)	from ability to control self to ability to determine self.

Pre-school age (Middle childhood , 3-7)

The material available does not cover the period between the crisis at age 3 and the crisis at age 7. Interpolating between what *is* said, it would seem that having freed herself from the control of the mother and father, the child wants and is able to enlarge her circle of socialisation and activity, but for this the child requires an intelligent knowledge of the culture, and experience of the world outside the home, something the 3-year-old does not yet have.

So during the period of middle childhood the child gradually extricates herself from her social dependence on the family, and expands her horizons as she develops intelligence, but an intelligence which builds up from her own experience, not yet truly conceptual intelligence.

Pre-school age (Middle childhood , 3-7)

Social Situation of Development	Central Neoformation	Central. Line of Development
Although lacking knowledge of the world, the child must develop an <i>intellectual</i> orientation.	intellect?	independent activity becoming able to do things without supervision

Crisis at age 7

According to Vygotsky, the crisis at age 7, which he also identifies approximately with the first loss of teeth, is marked by the *differentiation of internal and external life*, that is to say a gap between consciousness and behaviour.

“the beginning of the **differentiation of the internal and external** aspects of the child’s personality.”

and the loss of childlike naïveté:

“the loss of childlike directness distinguishes the child at seven years of age. The proximate cause of childlike directness is an inadequate differentiation of internal and external life. The experiences of the child, his desires and expressed desires, that is, behaviour and activity, usually are an inadequately differentiated whole in the preschooler. In us, this is all very definitely differentiated, and for this reason, the behaviour of the adult does not make as direct and naïve an impression as the behaviour of the child.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 289)

The symptoms of the crisis, Vygotsky describes as “playing the fool”:

“two traits... especially those who have a difficult childhood and experience the crisis in a concentrated form. The child begins to behave affectedly and capriciously ... Something deliberate, ridiculous, and artificial, some kind of frivolousness, clownishness, and *playing the fool* appears in his behaviour; the child makes himself a jester ... makes a fool of himself and elicits censure not laughter, this leaves the impression of unmotivated

behaviour ... behaviour that is somewhat fanciful, artificial mannered, and forced.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 289)

This gap between experience and action is bridged by the intellect:

“The loss of directness signifies the introduction of **the intellectual factor into our acts, and this wedges itself between experience and the direct act**, ... a certain intellectual factor appears in each experience, in each of its manifestations.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 290)

and as a result the child is able to develop an intellectual attitude to his own internal activity as well as that of others. Vygotsky uses the example of the ability to generalise perception to explain the importance of generalising experience, which he regards as possible only on the basis of this separation of consciousness and behaviour. With “childlike directness” it is not possible to reflect on your behaviour or mental activity.

“There’s a great difference between feeling hungry and knowing that I am hungry. In early childhood, the child does not know his own experiences. At the age level of seven years, we are dealing with the onset of the appearance of a structure of experience in which the child begins to understand what it means when he says: ‘I’m happy’, ... he is developing an intellectual orientation to his own experiences. Precisely as a seven year old child discovers his relation to other people, a seven-year-old discovers the fact of his own experiences. Because of this, certain features characterising the crisis of age seven appear. ...

“1. experiences acquire meaning and because of this the child develops new relations to himself that were impossible before the generalisation of experiences. ... the whole character of experiences of the child is reconstructed ...

“... a generalisation of feelings. ... The level of our demands of ourselves, of our success, of our position, arises specifically in connection with the crisis at age 7.

“Neoformations such as self-love and self-evaluation remain but the symptoms of the crisis (affection, posing) are transitional. In the crisis at age 7, because of the fact that a differentiation of the internal and external develops and intellectual experience first appears, a sharp conflict of experience also develops.

Vygotsky goes on to talk about the child’s relationship to his environment and discuss the question of the unity of the external and internal and so on:

“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.

“It is necessary to introduce into science a concept, little used in the study of the social development of the child: we have studied inadequately the internal relation of the child to those around him, and we have not considered him as an *active participant in the social situation*. We admit in words that it is necessary to study the personality and the environment of the child as a unit. 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 preliminarily investigators break it down, then try to unite one thing with another.” (LSV CW vol 5, p. 291-2)

Vygotsky is not looking at the development of new functions in this crisis period, but rather a process of restructuring the existing functions. The kind of meta-thinking that is reflected in taking an interest in learning, devising strategies for memorising things, and so on, depends on being able to make an object of one’s own consciousness. On the other hand, being obsessively concerned with one’s own consciousness, is pathological. Conversely, it seems that being overly concerned with the perception that others have of

you, of being conscious of having a social position and being able to make an object of that social position, is a necessary step to consciously managing one's social position, and living amongst one's peers, but excessive concern with how others perceive you is pathological.

“Facts show that in other conditions of rearing, the crisis occurs differently. In children who go from nursery school to kindergarten, the crisis occurs differently than it does in children who go into kindergarten from the family. However, this crisis occurs in all normally proceeding child development. ...”

“It is my impression that the crises actually have an internal source and consist in changes of an internal nature. There is no precise correspondence here between external and internal changes

But “academic” work is impossible without the differentiation of the mental life and behaviour of the child. Likewise, the child cannot exist in the world of their peers with childlike naïveté, but must develop the ability to act strategically, use tact, bluff, and the range of social skills demanded by life in the neighbourhood or playground.

Crisis at age 7 (self-love, posing)

Social Situation of Development	Central Neoformation	Central. Line of Development
strategic action impossible with childlike directness	narcissism	differentiation of behaviour and consciousness

Remarks about school age

Vygotsky does not deal with elementary school age in the fragments under consideration here, but he has done so at length elsewhere. This is not the place therefore to venture onto that vast terrain, but the foregoing gives us a certain unique insight into development during the period between the crisis at 5-7 years and the crisis at 13-14 years. In order to leave the home and protection of the mother and father, submit themselves to adult-strangers, representatives of the wider society, and even more forbidding, enter into the society of their peers in the playground and surrounding neighbourhood, the child must leave behind the childish innocence of middle childhood, and learn to act strategically, to hide their feelings when necessary, to make alliances, take sides and so on, all of which presupposes the separation of internal and external life established by the crisis at age 7. The same ability to make the workings of their own thinking an object of observation, is the pre-condition for the acquisition of concepts whose meaning is derived from the wider culture independently of the child's own experience; top-down learning beginning with an abstraction and concretising it, rather than bottom-up learning, generalising on the basis of their own experience. Bridging between these two domains is the domain of rule-based games, which in middle childhood take over from role-playing games, and the development of reasoning and a facility in giving grounds for their beliefs through arguments with their peers.

In this author's opinion, the crisis at age 13 or 14, the crisis which prepares the child for full membership of the wider society, presupposes the ability of the child to distance themselves from the truism of the society which they have acquired at school and take a critical attitude towards their own culture, norms and traditions. Up till now, the intelligent child has achieved high marks in her exams and good reports from her teacher,

but this approval is a quite insufficient qualification for adulthood. I would call this crisis of rebelliousness: without guidelines or sufficient independent experience, the child must attend not just to what is obvious and known, but grasp what is not obvious, and be prepared to challenge and argue even when they do not have good arguments. First they must develop the capacity to disagree and critique, in due time they will be able to muster good arguments and sufficient experience to back them up. Only then will they be able to critically appropriate the culture of their society and become a real member of that society, whatever their social position.

Some points of Overview

Self-relation and the Crisis periods

From birth through to the crisis of puberty, the child develops a more and more developed relation-to-self, that is, grades of consciousness or self-consciousness and self-determination. According to Vygotsky, the periods of critical development are marked by transformations in the development of the *will* or capacity for self-determination. Below is a summary of the development of self-determination through the periods of crisis.

Crisis period	Self-Relation
Birth	The child physically separates herself from the mother and creates the conditions for the 'front brain' to begin work, through which alone social interaction is possible.
Crisis at 12 months	Still unaware of herself as a person distinct from those around her (Ur-wir), the child manifests her own will and her own personality for the first time through interaction with adults.
Crisis at age 3	Having gradually developed a consciousness of themselves as a distinct person, the child separates themselves from the mother psychologically, and by differentiation of behaviour from affect, brings their behaviour under control of their own will.
Crisis at age 7	Having gradually expanded their radius of activity beyond the family, the child gains control over their relations with other people by the differentiation of internal and external life, manifested in an ability to act strategically
Crisis at age 13	Having acquired knowledge appropriate to their social position, the child distances herself from her birthright by taking a critical stance toward it.
Crisis at age 17	.

Note that the child begins totally undifferentiated, physically, biologically, psychologically and socially, and their psychological functions are also undifferentiated. So long as behaviour is not differentiated from affect, the child is a slave to their own feelings, for example. So long as the youth does not differentiate themselves from their social position they are unable to take moral responsibility. It is only by the complete differentiation of the various psychological functions, that the young person can gain control over their own behaviour and participation in society, and differentiate themselves

as an individual from those around them. It is only by this complete process of differentiation that the individual can actually become a *real part* of their society, actually contributing to the production and reproduction of the culture and society.

Thus the process is contradictory in the sense that integration into a truly human society presupposes a process of differentiation of the individual. The whole process of becoming human is driven, from beginning to end, by the striving of the child to overcome the limitations to its self-determination and emancipate itself from imprisonment by its own drives. This drive for emancipation then proves to be the only genuinely human drive, the drive which knows no end and transcends all barriers.

“Leading Activity” and Zone of Proximal Development

In this work collected together in Part II of Volume 5 of his Collected Works, Vygotsky gives no attention how adults may promote, facilitate or otherwise deliberately manage the child’s development. It is crystal clear that the culturally-determined interactions of the adults with the child play the major role in the child’s development, but Vygotsky does not discuss or recommend what adults might do to promote the child’s welfare.

Elsewhere of course he writes at great length on this topic, and it is beyond the scope of this review to enter this terrain. There is one issue however that we might have expected Vygotsky to make clear in this work. If we know what is the central line of development at a given stage in the child’s development, and the identity of the central neoformation, then what conditions or modes of interaction of the child will promote that line of development and ensure its successful completion? Repeating what was quoted above:

“At each given age period, development occurs in such a way that separate aspects of the child’s personality change and as a result of this, there is a reconstruction of the personality as a whole - in development [i.e., during the critical periods] there is just exactly a reverse dependence: the child’s personality changes as a whole in its internal structure and the movement of each of its parts is determined by the laws of change of this whole.” (pp. 196)

So during the stable periods of development, the social situation of development obliges the child to strive to overcome the frustration of certain limits on her functioning (which are known to us) and as a result of this striving, the central neoformation (which is known to us) develops and leads the whole process of development. What action on the part of adults then, what intervention in the social situation of development will promote that striving, and therefore promote the development along the main line of development and ensure its successful completion? It would appear that this is not a simple question, but one which should exercise the art and skill of the carer and educator. The point is that appropriate instruction which promotes the striving of the child and the differentiation and growth of the central neoformation will assist development, whereas efforts to interest the child in other activity will not be expected to bring any benefit in development.

It is here that Vygotsky’s concept of the “Zone of Proximal Development” is relevant. Instruction may lead development, if and only if instruction assists the child in promoting the differentiation of the *leading* neoformation. Vygotsky proposed that what the child can do with assistance (for example by asking leading questions, offering suggestions) or in play (which allows the child to strive to do what they actually cannot yet do) today, they will be able to do tomorrow without assistance. The desired “flow over” to different

functions resulting from success in performing the given task will only occur if the intervention has promoted the central or leading neoformation. Otherwise, teaching by assisting the child with a task may help them learn that task, but there will be no flow over to development. In that sense, we could introduce into the concepts Vygotsky uses in this work the idea of “leading activity,” that mode of activity and social interaction which promotes the striving of the child in exercise of the main neoformation of the age-period.

During the periods of critical development however the situation is different; the child is trying to rupture the social situation of development and create a social position for themselves in a new social situation. The child’s behaviour in these periods of crisis is nonetheless disruptive. The child’s carers need to understand what lies behind the child’s behaviour and assist the child through to the new social situation. Again, this is a question which will exercise the skill and art of the educator and carer, and Vygotsky did not live to offer advice on this matter beyond helping to give us an understanding of the dynamics underlying the child’s behaviour and development.

Conclusion

It is the writer’s hope that the above notes will stimulate research on the part of others more knowledgeable in the domain of child development. Much has been learnt since 1934, and the social conditions of Vygotsky’s life are far removed from our own. Nevertheless, the problems posed by the development of the psyche from neonate to puberty are universal and it is reasonable to suppose that the notion of “social situation of development” and the related concepts might be fruitful instruments of research even today.

Vygotsky’s thought was very influenced by the milieu in which he was working, in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, led by the Bolshevik Party committed to Marxism and the project of clearing the way for the emergence of a new, higher type of human being. As a result, even though it appears that Vygotsky never studied Hegel, he was very familiar with Marx and the above ideas reflect an Hegelian-Marxist conception of development, brilliantly implemented on the basis of the scientific study of child development and the appropriation of existing psychological knowledge.

Reference

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