

LURIA: A UNITARY VIEW OF HUMAN BRAIN AND MIND

Luciano Mecacci

(Department of Psychology, University of Florence, Italy)

ABSTRACT

Special questions the eminent Russian psychologist and neuropsychologist Aleksandr R. Luria (1902-1977) dealt with in his research regarded the relationship between animal and human brain, child and adult mind, normal and pathological, theory and rehabilitation, clinical and experimental investigation. These issues were integrated in a unitary theory of cerebral and psychological processes, under the influence of both different perspectives active in the first half of the Nineteenth century (psychoanalysis and historical-cultural school, first of all) and the growing contribution of neuropsychological research on brain-injured patients.

Key words: neuropsychology (history), animal brain, development, single case, rehabilitation

During the year 2002, on the occasion of the centenary of the birth of Aleksandr Romanovich Luria, various congresses were organized to honour the eminent Russian psychologist and neuropsychologist. In Amsterdam, Bremen, Florence and Moscow (to name just a few of the locations) what most impressed the participants was the wide variety of papers which concerned very different areas of brain and mind sciences. Each speaker touched upon a certain aspect of the work of Luria depending on the way in which he or she had been familiar with his research: as pupil and/or co-worker, or as psychologist or neuropsychologist, or as an historian of psychology, neuropsychology or Russian culture. The impression, renewed at those meetings, is that when only a part of his vast and complex scientific activity is taken into account one runs the risk of simplifying Luria's theoretical and methodological contributions. The biography, written by his pupil and co-worker Evgenia D. Homskeya (2001), gives us a sufficiently well-informed and well-constructed picture of Luria's scientific career. The index itself helps us to single out "the stages of the journey undertaken" (as the Russian title of Luria's autobiography says): co-working with Lev S. Vygotsky (1896-1934) and the foundation of the cultural-historical school (the Twenties), cross-cultural research, expedition to Central Asia, and studies on twins (the Thirties), the war, the front and the first works on brain-injured patients (the Forties), research on mentally retarded children, brain injuries and rehabilitation (the Fifties), the systematic development of neuropsychological research (the Sixties and the Seventies). When Luria died in 1977, he was especially focusing on the problem of single-case approach in neuropsychology. However it is difficult to get an integrated idea of the scientific and cultural activity of Luria from his

autobiography or from the monographs up to now written on him. There is often the sensation of a fragmentation of Luria's work: seeing him as moving from developmental psychology to neuropsychology; from the child, generally normal, to the adult, generally brain-injured. Moreover some important theoretical and methodological aspects, concerning the first works by Luria in the Twenties and Thirties, are not adequately treated. We refer first of all to the significance of the first great book, *The Nature of Human Conflicts*, published directly in English in 1932 and in Russian only in 2002. Luria devotes to this work rather less than one page in his autobiography (1977) and Homskeya (2001) does the same, with neither of the authors making it clear that in this book of more than 400 pages there is already outlined a precise project unifying the normal dimension and the pathological one, the clinical investigation and the experimental one. Recently a collection of Luria's early writings was edited amongst which was published for the first time the essay written by Luria at the age of 19 entitled originally *Principles of Real Psychology (on Some Trends of Contemporary Psychology)* (Luria, 2003). This one-hundred-page work is impressive for both the wealth of knowledge of the psychology, philosophy and sociology of the time, as well as the theoretical perspective which preludes the future cultural-historical school. When Luria writes about the "historical-social foundations" of psychological processes, he holds as theoretical reference the debate within German philosophy (Windelband, Rickert, Dilthey, etc.) on the distinction between the sciences of nature and the human sciences, between the nomothetic approach and the idiographic one, as well as the sociological contributions (in particular that of Durkheim); when he writes about the relationships between basic and clinical psychology the reference is to Freud, Jung



Fig. 1 – The child Aleksandr Romanovich (3 years about) with his mother Evgenia Viktorovna (Haskin) and father Roman Albertovich Luria. Luria belonged to a Jewish middle-high social class living first in Kazan (where the psychologist was born in 1902) and then from 1921 in Moscow (the mother was a dentist and the father was a well-known physician, interested in psychosomatic disorders).

and Adler. So it is clear, as has already been pointed out regarding Vygotsky (van der Veer and Valsiner, 1991), that the cultural-historical theory has roots more complex than the simple application of historical and dialectical materialism to the problems of psychology. When Luria and Vygotsky begin, probably also under the political and ideological pressures of the time, to refer to and to quote Marx and Engels' texts, they do so within a more complex theoretical framework. Surely it was this theoretical and cultural background that made Vygotsky's school "suspicious" for the official ideology of Stalin's time, eventually causing it to be condemned and to decline until its rehabilitation at the end of the Fifties. Moreover it must be remembered that Luria, who belonged to a well-off and educated Jewish family, was a friend of leading figures of pre- and post-revolutionary Russian culture (he had a close friendship with the director Sergei M. Eisenstein), and up until his death he was one of the few Russian scientists who had the possibility of being in direct contact with Western colleagues, and of maintaining an international perspective in his research. In this brief note we wish merely to underline the unity of Luria's work by showing some of its main theoretical and

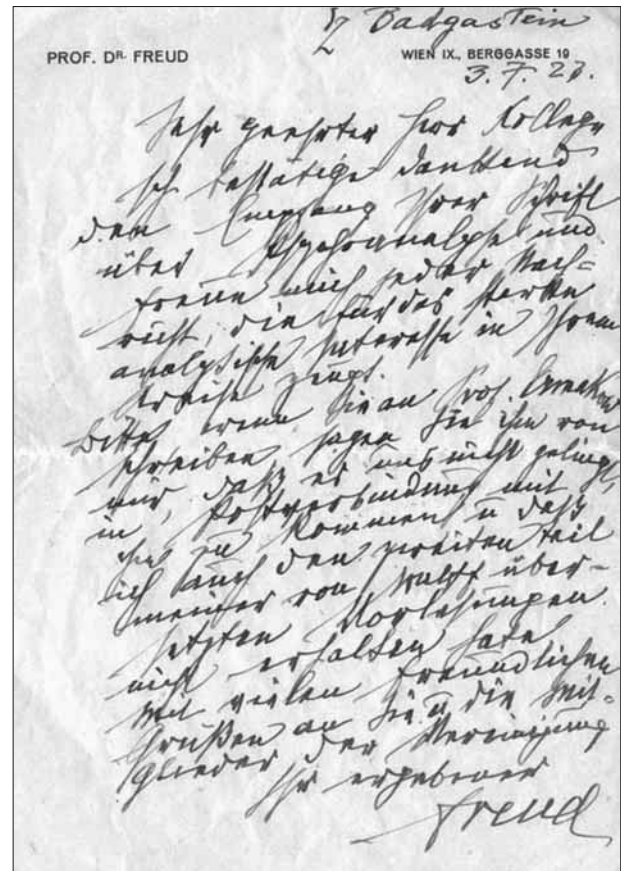


Fig. 2 – Sigmund Freud's letter to Luria (July 3, 1922) with the appreciation for the foundation of the Psychoanalytical Society in Kazan by the young Russian psychologist. Luria was then the secretary of the Russian Psychoanalytical Society in Moscow up to 1927.

methodological characteristics accentuated by recent monographs and symposia.¹

ANIMAL BRAIN VERSUS HUMAN BRAIN

First, Luria started from a clear distinction between the brain organization of animals and the brain organization of human beings. This view was typical of the historical-cultural school founded by Vygotsky with Luria and the other leading figure, Aleksey N. Leontiev (1903-1979). The main source of this difference was found in what these authors called "extracerebral connections", that is the generation of new integrated brain systems due to the influence of historical and cultural factors. Compared to the animal brain, the functions of which depend mainly on genetic factors, the human brain has the property to organize new anatomo-functional

¹ For Luria's biography see, first of all, his autobiography, slightly different in English (1979) and Russian (1982) editions; the biography by his daughter Elena (Luria, 1994), and the monographs by Levitin (1998) and Homskaya (1992, 2001, English translation edited by DE Tupper). A complete bibliography of Luria's works (and translations) is now given in Luria (2003, pp. 384-430). Figures are drawn from our book on the history of psychology (Mecacci, in press), and the web site edited by Michael Cole: <http://luria.ucsd.edu/> (except for the Figure 9, reproduced by courtesy of Anne-Lise Christensen).

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