

Annual International Scientific Conference Early Childhood Care and Education, ECCE
2016, 12-14 May 2016, Moscow, Russia

On the psychological mechanism of ontogenetic development in the context of developmental and educational psychology

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Abstract

The article offers the author's view of the psychological mechanism for the development of a child. It is regarded as the process of ripening and resolving of fundamental contradictions between the child's system of relations and modes of activity acquired by him. Underlined by the author is the objective nature of ontogenetic development as well as the role of child's motivation as a driver of necessary transformations of the child's activity leading to his psychological growth. The similarities and differences between the author's approach and that of D. B. Elkonin are precisely traced. The author's arguments are supported by a lot of evidence from the theory and practice of developmental and educational psychology with special focus on the role of social institutions.

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Peer-review under responsibility of the organizing committee of ECCE 2016.

Keywords: activity development, psychological mechanism, system of relations, mode of activity, motives, social institutions.

1. Introduction

The identification of a psychological mechanism for a human being's ontogenetic development is undoubtedly one of the most fundamental problems for developmental and educational psychology. It could hardly be considered fully investigated as yet thus demanding some further argumentation. The author's approach is based on the works of two outstanding Russian psychologists: L.S. Vygotsky [1], [2] who laid the foundation of the developmental and educational psychology in this country in the first third of the 20th century and D. B. Elkonin [3], [4], one of Vygotsky's most faithful disciples and followers who made the most serious attempt to discover psychological laws of development in the 60s-80s.

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Commenting on the idea of development as the leading one “for all fields of reality and for all spheres of scientific knowledge” Vygotsky [1] mentioned some barriers blocking the way to its true comprehension: they include “not only certain metaphysical theories rejecting the idea of development itself, but also theories pursuing some false ideas of development”. Unfortunately, many of them still continue their existence as unconscious axioms even nowadays. In this article the author criticizes some of these methodologically untenable ideas concerning the theory and practice of developmental and educational psychology.

2. The role of social institutes

Vygotsky’s critique made from the position of his cultural historical theory was mostly aimed at the nativistic view of child development typical for “old psychology” according to which the search for a psychological mechanism for development is focused on an individual organism’s specific features rather than on a joint activity in which a child is involved (Vygotsky) [1]. Indeed, any researcher has a chance to observe in real life a variety of individual trajectories of ontogenetic development caused primarily by the diversity of human activity forms.

Unfortunately, the nativistic notion of ontogenetic development seems to be inseparable from treating a person as an isolated individual. In opposing this idea Vygotsky obviously shared the position of K. Marx who held [5] that: “An individual is a social being. Therefore, any manifestation of his life even if it does not appear in the immediate form of the collective, jointly performed manifestation of life, is still a manifestation and assertion of social life”.

2.1 Family

From this perspective, Elkonin’s concept of development should be represented in a more detailed way. One of the concerns of his concept is the nature of relations between a child and his environment. It is expressed through the notion of the social situation of development (SSD) introduced by Vygotsky and elaborated by Elkonin. According to Vygotsky [1], SSD is “quite a peculiar, specific for the given age, exclusive, unique and inimitable relationship between a child and the reality surrounding him, first of all, the social one.

In his later studies of childhood social history Elkonin attempted to trace the historical transformation of the “child-society” relationship indicating that in the course of time these relations had been transformed from being immediate to mediated by nurturing and teaching but afterwards this function passed to the family. So “children-in-society” system of relations appears to be veiled by “child-family” and within a family – “child-individual adult” system of relations” (Elkonin) [3]. Nevertheless, a child being a member of society is a concrete subject of the overall society productive powers and production relations, while he tries on certain social roles and acquires certain social statuses fixed by the law: an inheritor, an assignee, etc. It should be noted, however, that even nowadays the status of a child as a subject of law is not fully recognized: parents too often look upon their child as something belonging to them.

This could probably account for the fact that contemporary developmental and educational psychology still tend to represent a child’s relations with others only on an interpersonal level. In this case the real social relations or “the impersonal relations” the child is de-facto involved in almost never appear in the foreground [6]. Moreover, they are often ignored although it is these social relations that set up the parameters of the SSD for a child, determining the nature of his interpersonal relations with others. How are these relations formed?

The system of a child’s relations with the world can hardly appear out of nowhere. A human being who comes into life as an organism with a number of specific organic needs finds himself within a system of objective, historically concrete social relations. Their system is from the very first moment created by his activity which being social in its nature becomes more and more individualized in accordance with the circumstances of his life. For objective relations to transform themselves into the child’s **own** relations the child should master his **own** modes of activity appropriate to the present system of his relations. To this end the child’s organic needs are to be “objectified” or, in other words, transformed into human requirements aimed at

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