Psychology of Experiencing: A Russian View*

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It would not be an exaggeration to say that Fyodor Vasilyuk’s *The Psychology of Experiencing* (1984/1988) constitutes the first important contribution to the field of psychodynamic theory made by a Soviet author in the last 50 years. The book demonstrates (a) the author’s intention to take seriously classical and more recent Western studies of the psychodynamics of the unconscious, (b) his considerable effort to integrate Western ideas with the psychological principles developed in Vygotsky’s school, and (c) his highly original approach to the phenomenon of coping with critical psychological situations. Now this important book is available in, if not perfect, then quite satisfactory English translation.

The central notion of Vasilyuk’s theory is that of “experiencing perezhivanie.” The Russian word perezhivanie has a spectrum of different meanings from experience to suffering. In the context of Vasilyuk’s work it should probably be rendered as “living through” a crisis. The term *experiencing* denotes “a special inner activity or inner work by means of which an individual succeeds in withstanding various (usually painful) events and situations in life, succeeds in regaining the mental equilibrium which has been temporarily lost-succeeds, in short, in coping with a crisis” (p. 18).

Although Vasilyuk discusses different critical situations, his most original contribution is to understanding how we endure deep, existential crises. Such a crisis occurs when a person faces a situation presenting the “impossibility of living,” that is, the impossibility of realizing the internal necessities of human life. The task confronting a person in such a situation differs significantly from the problems associated with less profound critical situations. The task here is not in recognizing the correct meaning of the situation, and not in elucidating a hidden but existent meaning, but in conceiving of a new meaning and bringing this new meaning into actual existence. To be successful, the “work” of living through the deep, existential crisis must be creative. The prototype for such work should be sought, therefore, not in the realm of primitive reactions, but in the creativity of an author.

In suggesting this literary prototype, Vasilyuk departs considerably from the mainstream Soviet psychology, which took as a model either an animal (as in classical and neo-Pavlovianism) or an ideal worker of the Marxist social theory (Kozulin, 1984). The literary prototype chosen by Vasilyuk identifies him as a follower of Vygotskian psychology and Bakhtin’s philosophy (see Clark & Holquist, 1984; Kozulin, in press; Vygotsky, 1986). Both Vygotsky and Bakhtin claimed that to understand human psychology as truly human, one should take as a paradigm the highest forms of human activity. The creation of a literary text appears to be among the most elaborate and at the same time accessible of these activities. The creative act of an author thus suggests itself as a paradigm of any human action.

Vasilyuk does not create his model of critical situations in an intellectual vacuum. With the aim of placing his ideas in proper context, he reviews the concepts of stress, frustration, and conflict. He defines *stress* as the problem of coping with situations that threaten the immediate satisfaction of the vital needs of individual. *Frustration* is

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defined as difficulty in carrying out an action aimed at a specific goal associated with particular motivation. Conflict refers to the lack of consonance and balance on the level of consciousness. Three types of activity correspond to the above mentioned critical situations: (a) vital, organic activity corresponds to stress; (b) particular external action corresponds to frustration; and (c) the activity of consciousness corresponds to crisis.

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<th>External Life-World</th>
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Figure 1: Four Life-Worlds

To bring some order into existent empirical knowledge about critical situations, Vasilyuk proposes his own typology based on four prototypical life-worlds (Lebenswelten; see Figure 1). Each life-world has external and internal aspects:Externally, a life-world can be easy or difficult, and internally, it can be simple or complex. For example, the internally simple and externally difficult life-world is best characterized by the presence of external barriers on the way to the achievement of the individual’s goal and the absence of internal complications (Quadrant 2). “Activity in this world is distinguished by an indefectible thrust toward the object of need. This activity is affected by no distractions, no temptations to turn aside; the subject knows no doubts or hesitations, no feelings of guilt, no torments of conscience, in short, the simplicity of the internal world frees activity from all internal barriers and limitations” (Vasilyuk, p. 123). When the dominating goal is an abstract idea or belief we are dealing with a fanatic; when there is a concrete goal or object we are dealing with a person who has an impulse control problem such as kleptomania, pyromania, and soon.

Successful coping in this simple and difficult life-world depends on the development of the psychological mechanism of patience.

Patience is “reality oriented,” whereas the defense mechanisms that might be activated in the situation of frustrated action are “pleasure oriented.” The mechanism of patience allows us to post-pone gratification for a period sufficient for the development of compensatory facilities. Patience is also essential in coping with frustration through the acceptance of a substitute value. In the simple and difficult life-world, the individual is only apparently fixated on a specific object; the fixation is actually on the gratification of the need, and as long as the mechanism of patience allows for the replacement of one satisfying object by another the frustration can be successfully overcome.

In the center of Vasilyuk’s interest lies the complex and difficult life-world (Quadrant 4) in which a person faces the task of self-formation and self-realization. The individual must bring about the unity of the self, and not only as an internal conscious project, but as an actual existence in a difficult world. The prototype of experiencing in this life-world is a creative experience of an author. Because the work of art is simultaneously present and not yet present at the moment of its conception by the author, the unity of the self first appears as life-intent or life-project. This intent as related to the system of values is felt by a person as a “calling,” and in its relation to the spatio-temporal actuality of existence it becomes “life work.” The crisis in the complex and difficult life-world is the most profound encountered by a person and its overcoming is possible only as a “second birth,” that is, the formation and actualization of the new meaning of life.
To demonstrate the vicissitudes of living through the deep, existential crisis, Vasilyuk discusses the case of Raskolnikov from Dostoevsky’s *Crime and Punishment*.

The original crisis of Raskolnikov reveals itself through his abhorrence of being “with people.” His failure to stay “out of people” leads to his pathological “volution”: to be “above people.” Raskolnikov did not succeed, however, in consciously reconciling his theory with his inner feelings, and his crime was not committed in full awareness, but rather in a state of paralysed will and confused consciousness.

After his crime was committed, it became even more clear how dismally Raskolnikov’s theory failed him as a defense mechanism. He is unable to integrate his crime into his life because his nature, unlike his previous logical speculations, refuses to accept the theory as a feasible defense. As a result of the collision with the actuality of crime, his nature, that is, Raskolnikov’s personality, is about to disintegrate. First attempts at reintegration take the form of defenses aimed at lowering the level of tension between the actuality of his crime and the reproaches of his conscience. Because nothing could be done with a crime already committed, and Raskolnikov’s own conscience could not bear the guilt, he projects his guilt onto his mother and sister, whom he begins to hate. This defense fails because it clashes with Raskolnikov’s love for his family, and he escaping contradiction by distancing himself from the loved ones. Raskolnikov thus returns to the original conflict of being attracted by people and being at the same time unable to share with them the conflict now amplified by his terrible guilt.

I will skip here all intermediate stages of attempted reintegration of Raskolnikov’s personality suggested by Vasilyuk and focus on the last and ultimately successful one. This success is connected with Raskolnikov’s newly discovered ability to move through the experiential stages of Guilt-Repentance-Redemption. To be able to move through these stages, the individual must shed his or her alienation and “plug into” a “social-cultural schema,” as Vasilyuk calls it. Such a schema provides the individual with cultural tools and systems of meanings that help him reintegrate his personality. Religious beliefs and rituals are the oldest of these schemas, and Raskolnikov’s redemption becomes possible because of them.

But to plug into such a schema is not easy even without the crisis in which Raskolnikov finds himself. What is needed is a human intermediary, the significant Other. For Raskolnikov such a significant Other is Sonia, who represents the new system of values and who connects Raskolnikov to a religious schema. In a dialogue with this Other, Raskolnikov achieves Repentance, that is, reevaluation of the crime and guilt from the point of view of the new system of values. His individual crime is now seen in a timeless framework of the fight between Good and Evil, as a result of a minute surrender to Arrogance [*gordynia*]. This new Raskolnikov is able, however painfully, to integrate his own crime as a part of his life, because this crime now acquires certain meaning, provided by the religious schema. The beginning of redemption starts with ritual acts aimed at condemning the Arrogance: kissing the feet of Sonia, of his mother, and of the earth, and, at Sonia’s request, with public declaration of his guilt.

The analysis of Raskolnikov’s living through the crisis reveals the ultimate type of coping as overcoming. Unlike defense mechanisms, which temporarily and locally help to alleviate the problem, overcoming, when successful, leads to a complete restructuring of the inner world of individual. Overcoming is simultaneously both more and less stereotypical than defense mechanisms. It is more stereotypical because the individual lives through the crisis with the help of social-cultural schemas that are supra-
individual. At the same time the literary model is upheld here: Just as poetry, which is based on the supra-individual foundation of linguistic and literary development, remains uniquely individual, so does this creative way of living through the crisis.

By choosing the literary model of human experiencing, Vasilyuk affirms his adherence to the humanistic, rather than scientific approach to human psychology. His work can also be seen as a blueprint for the future convergence of humanistic psychology with Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory of human development.

REFERENCES


ALEX KOZULIN was born in Moscow and earned his medical degree at the Moscow Medical Institute in 1972 and his Ph.D. at the Moscow Institute of Psychology in 1978. In 1979 he immigrated to the United States and has, since 1984, been teaching psychology at Boston University. He is the author of Psychology in Utopia (1984) and Vygotsky’s Psychology: A Biography of Ideas (1990). Currently he is working on the theoretical problems of development psychology at the International Center for Learning Potential in Jerusalem.