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Chapter 3

The Concept of *Perezhivanie* in Cultural-Historical Theory: Content and Contexts

Nikolai Veresov

Abstract This chapter, advancing Vygotsky's original definitions, makes an important distinction between the two meanings of *perezhivanie*—*perezhivanie* as a *psychological phenomena/process* which can be empirically observed and studied (P1) and *perezhivanie* as a *concept, a theoretical tool* for analysis of the process of development (P2). The chapter is an attempt to unlock *the theoretical content* of the cultural-historical concept of *perezhivanie* in three interrelated dimensions, in relation to: (1) the concepts of social environment and interaction of present and ideal forms; (2) the general genetic law of cultural development; (3) the idea of analysis of complex wholes by units. Advancing Vygotsky's legacy, this chapter introduces a concept of dramatic *perezhivanie* which allows to discover the dialectics of the process of development of human mind as a sociocultural genesis both in evolutionary and revolutionary aspects as well as in a unity of macro and microgenesis.

3.1 Identifying the Problem: P1 and P2

3.1.1 *What Are the Meanings of *Perezhivanie* in Vygotsky's Texts?*

Over the past two decades Vygotsky's concept of *perezhivanie* has attracted increasing attention by various researchers working within the cultural-historical tradition (Rieber and Wollock 1997; Van der Veer and Valsiner 1994; Mahn and John-Steiner 2002; Daniels 2008).

The term *perezhivanie* is quite difficult to explain and almost impossible to translate. There is no English equivalent for this term; even the Spanish *vivencia* (Quiñones and Fleer 2011) does not seem to be appropriate. After several unsuccessful attempts to translate this term, some authors use the term *perezhivanie*

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without any translation, simply as perezhivanie (see, among many others, Mahn 2003; Daniels 2008; Ferholt 2009, 2010; Fakhrutdinova 2010; Smagorinsky 2011).

Yet, what matters is not the word or the term, but its meaning and content. From this standpoint, it makes sense to take a close look at meanings of perezhivanie in Vygotsky's various original texts. Thus, in 1931 he defines perezhivanie as follows:

Perezhivanie (переживание) is a common name for direct psychological experience.¹ From a subjective perspective, every psychological process is Perezhivanie. In every Perezhivanie we distinguish: Firstly, an act, and secondly, the content of Perezhivanie. The first is an activity related to the appearance of certain Perezhivanie; the second is the content, the composition of what is experienced (Varshava and Vygotsky 1931, p. 128).

This definition might look strange and even irrelevant to the cultural-historical theoretical framework. It looks like an umbrella-like “indefinite definition” (common name for direct psychological experience), whereas in the Historical Meaning of Psychological Crisis written in 1926–1927 Vygotsky was very critical of definitions of this kind emphasising that “to try and explain everything means to explain nothing” (Vygotsky 1997a, p. 246). Yet, there is no contradiction here: This definition was from the Psychological Dictionary and reflected the traditional classical meaning of the term perezhivanie as it existed in the psychology of those times originated from Dilthey, Dewey and James. This meaning of perezhivanie encompasses a huge variety of psychological phenomena; it is a phenomenological definition (“from a subjective perspective, every psychological process is Perezhivanie”). However, what is important is the same word might mean a process (act, activity) or a content; in other words, perezhivanie is “How I am experiencing something” and “What I am experiencing.” The word “activity” should not mislead the reader as it has nothing to do with the concept of activity developed by Leont’ev and his scientific school. The Russian word *deyatel’nost’* (деятельность) was very often used as a synonym of *aktivnost* (активность), for example, Pavlov’s term “higher nervous activity” is *vysshaya niervnaya deyatel’nost’* (высшая нервная деятельность).

This example shows that the first meaning of perezhivanie in Vygotsky’s texts coincides with the traditional classical definition that existed in psychology (every psychological process is perezhivanie); however, it distinguishes two meanings of the term—(1) perezhivanie as a process and (2) perezhivanie as content. In *The Psychology of Art* written in the beginning of the 1920s, we can also find lot of places, where perezhivanie is used with these meanings (see, for example, Vygotsky’s thinking about aesthetic experience (Vygotsky 1971, 1986).

My second example is from *Lectures of Paedology of 1933/34* (Vygotsky 2001). At present only one of these lectures (*The Problem of Environment*) is available in English (Vygotsky 1994). Here we find a different approach:

¹Опыт (опыт) in Russian original text.

...perezhivanie is a concept which allows us to study the role and influence of environment on the psychological development of children in the analysis of the laws of development (Vygotsky 1994, p. 343).

The meaning here is radically different from the first one. First, perezhivanie is a *concept*, not a definition. Second, it is related to the process of *development*. Third, it is related to the role and influence of *environment* on development. And fourth, it has a strong reference to the *psychological laws* of development. Perezhivanie is a concept which allows us to study the process of development which means that this concept is an *analytical tool*, a *theoretical lens* to study the process of development.

Thus, in relation to the various meanings of perezhivanie in Vygotsky's original texts we have a complex picture. Meaning number 1 is perezhivanie as a common name of all psychological processes and experiences, which can be labelled an "ontological" or "phenomenological" meaning as it covers a huge variety of phenomena and reflects their ontological status and nature. To make it simple I suggest we call it P1. Accordingly, perezhivanie as a process could be labeled as P1.1 and perezhivanie as content would be P1.2.

Meaning number 2 (P2) is not about general name of various psychological phenomena, it is a concept related to the process of development, the role of environment and laws of development. P2 is a theoretical tool, analytical lens to study the process of development within a system of other concepts of cultural-historical theory. In other words, the meaning of P2 is theoretical (gnoseological or epistemological, depending on philosophical terminology we follow).

3.1.2 *Recent Studies on Perezhivanie: A Very Brief Overview*

A survey of existing literature shows a very complex picture. I do not need to undertake in-depth analysis as it is presented in previous chapter of this Volume (see Mok, this Volume). I will focus therefore on some aspects related to my topic.

All authors agree that perezhivanie is essential for understanding Vygotsky's thought. However, different authors highlight different aspects. Some researchers emphasise the emotional character of perezhivanie (Mahn and John-Steiner 2002; Daniels 2010), whereas others point to its complex and integrative nature as a unity of emotional and cognitive components in perceiving and understanding the social environment (Antoniadou 2011; Ferholt 2009; Rieber and Wollock 1997; Vasilyuk 1991). These explanations represent a wide combination of various characteristics. Thus, taking these definitions, perezhivanie is discovered as a special type of psychological process (or state of mind) which includes and relates to:

- (1) emotional experience,
- (2) interpretation,

- (3) imagination,
- (4) creativity,
- (5) perception,
- (6) living through,
- (7) meaning making,
- (8) appropriation,
- (9) internalisation,
- (10) understanding,
- (11) cognition.

This list might look strange; even more, it might look like a mechanical and artificial combination of different approaches and understandings. I would agree, but what this list makes clear is that most recent studies strictly correspond to the P1 meaning (every psychological process is *perezhivanie*).² Thus, there is no problem here. Where is the problem then? In my opinion, the problem is that we have little research on *perezhivanie* with the P2 meaning. Thus, the research of Brennan is focused on applying P2 as an analytical tool to study infant–adult interactions (Brennan 2014), some researchers undertake interesting studies in developing the content of P2 by theorising play (Fleer 2013), parent–child interactions (Chen 2015) and emotion regulation in child care settings (Fleer and Hammer 2013). However, in general, *perezhivanie* as a concept and as a theoretical analytical tool remains much less discovered compared to P1.

The best summary of this state of affairs belongs to Smagorinsky who claims:

... *perezhivanie* thus far remains more a tantalizing notion than a concept with clear meaning and import to those who hope to draw on it. How this feature of human development is constructed and employed in future work will affect how Vygotsky's legacy in the development of a comprehensive, unified cultural psychology is extended and realized by those working in his considerable wake (Smagorinsky 2011, p. 339).

I would agree with this and would go even further—before using the concept as an analytical tool in research design and data analysis, before developing such a tool further we have to have a clear understanding what this tool is, what is the original theoretical content of this concept within cultural-historical theory.

3.1.3 Aims of the Chapter

The way to understand this concept and to restore its theoretical content is to identify clearly the place and role of this concept within cultural-historical theory and to show the connections of this concept with other concepts, principles, and laws of the theory.

²Internet resources is another evidence to support this conclusion, see, for example an extended discussion on the status of *perezhivanie* at <http://www.ethicalpolitics.org/seminars/perezhivanie.htm>.

In this chapter, I try to unlock *the theoretical content* of the concept of perezhivanie in three interrelated dimensions. First, I try to elucidate perezhivanie as one of the key concepts in Vygotsky's theory. Second, I try to show its place within Vygotsky's theory by identifying its connections and interrelations with other concepts and principles of cultural-historical theory. Third, I try to undertake an analysis of perezhivanie as a theoretical tool for analysing the sociocultural genesis of human mind. By doing this I will follow the P2 meaning, i.e. I will uncover its theoretical content in relation to the process of development and the role of environment and, finally, in relation to the general law of cultural development.

The way I suggest is very close to Chaiklin's approach to another concept of cultural-historical theory—the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Chaiklin claims that to understand the role and place of the ZPD in Vygotsky's theory,

... one must appreciate the theoretical perspective in which it appeared... That is, we need to understand what Vygotsky meant by 'development' in general, if we are going to understand what he meant by 'zone of proximal development' in particular. In this way, the reader can develop a generative understanding of the theoretical approach, which will be more valuable than a dictionary definition of the concept (Chaiklin 2003, p. 46).

This chapter is an attempt to initiate a generative understanding of the theoretical content and context of perezhivanie. This goal is not easy to reach and it is hardly possible to do this in one single paper; my task here is merely to show certain ways to identify the psychological and developmental content of perezhivanie as a theoretical concept of cultural-historical theory. In doing this, I will mostly concentrate on Vygotsky's original texts to show the possible ways of developing a generative understanding of the psychological content of this concept.

The process of the cultural development of the human mind is the subject matter of cultural-historical theory. In cultural-historical theory, every concept and principle reflects and explains certain aspects of this extremely complex process of the cultural development of the human mind. Hence, the way to define the place and the role of perezhivanie as a concept within this theory is to answer the question: How is this concept related to the process of cultural development, and which aspects of cultural development does it theoretically reflect?

Within this framework, the cultural-historical concept of "perezhivanie" is discussed in relation to three main aspects. It is related to:

- (1) the concept of social environment³ as a source of development,
- (2) the general genetic law of cultural development,
- (3) the idea of a unit of analysis.

³I use the notion of "social environment", not "social-cultural environment" which looks more appropriate in this context, because it corresponds to Vygotsky's own terminology. According to Vygotsky "the word "social", as applied to our subject, has a broad meaning. First of all, in the broadest sense, it means that everything cultural is social" (Vygotsky 1997b, p. 106).

3.2 Perezhivanie, Social Environment, and Social Situation of Development

3.2.1 *Social Environment as a Source of Development*

In contrast to “classical” developmental theories which explain development as a process determined by two groups of factors—biological and social—cultural-historical theory characterises the social environment not as a factor, but as a source of development. Vygotsky claims:

The social environment is the source for the appearance of all specific human properties of the personality gradually acquired by the child or the source of social development of the child, *which is included in the process of actual interaction of “ideal” and present forms* (Vygotsky 1998, p. 203).

However, what does “social environment as the source of development” mean? There are two more concepts, which bring psychological content to this general claim. The first one is the concept of “social situation of development”:

...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 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. Thus, the first question we must answer in studying the dynamics of any age is to explain the social situation of development (Vygotsky 1998, p. 198).

The concept of social situation of development, on one hand, characterises the social world as a source of development and, on the other hand, describes a special type of *relation* between the child and the social environment, a kind of starting point of development of the child’s higher forms of behaviour and consciousness. In other words, social situation of development is not a social environment; it is a social situation of development as a dynamic system of relations and interactions of a child and social environment. It, therefore, reflects the influence of a social reality on a child development and at the same time foregrounds what a child brings to the social environment.

The second concept is the “interaction of ideal and primary (present) forms.” Introducing this concept Vygotsky gives the following example:

We have a child who has only just begun to speak and he pronounces single words... The child speaks in one word phrases, but his mother talks to him in language which is already grammatically and syntactically formed and which has a large vocabulary, even though it is being toned down for the child’s benefit. All the same, she speaks using the fully perfected form of speech. Let us agree to call this developed form, which is supposed to make its appearance at the end of the child’s development, the final or ideal form - ideal in the sense that it acts as a model for that which should be achieved at the end of the developmental period; and final in the sense that it represents what the child is supposed to attain at the end

of his development. And let us call the child's form of speech the primary or rudimentary⁴ form (Vygotsky 1994, p. 347–348).

If no appropriate ideal form can be found in the environment, and the development of the child, for whatever reason, is to take place outside these specific conditions, i.e. without any interaction with the final (ideal) form, then this proper form will fail to develop in the child. The following example makes this point clearer:

Try to imagine a child who is growing up among deaf people and is surrounded by deaf and dumb parents and children his own age. Will he be able to develop speech?... Speech will not develop at all in such a child. In order for speech to develop, it is necessary for this ideal form to be present in the environment and to interact with the child's rudimentary form; only then can speech development be achieved (ibid, p. 349).

In a broader sense, the “ideal form” might be considered as any kind of developed cultural form of behaviour and interaction the child meets in her social environment. Vygotsky stresses that the interaction between the developed (ideal) and the present (primary) forms is a distinguishing feature and “the greatest peculiarity of child development in contrast to other types of development” (Vygotsky 2001, p. 112–113).

The child's development and its “individual developmental trajectory” depends on (1) what kind of social situation the child is involved in, (2) what kind of ideal forms the social surrounding presents to the child, and (3) what kind of interactions take place between the child's real forms and social ideal forms.

3.2.2 *Perezhivanie and Social Environment: Vygotsky's Example*

Let us examine an example of *perezhivanie* given by Vygotsky. In *The Problem of Environment* (Vygotsky 1994, 2001) he gives an example which shows the role and place of a child's *perezhivanie*.

He begins the description of an example with a very general statement:

...for a proper understanding of the role which environment plays in child development it is always necessary to approach environment not with an absolute but a relative yardstick... Environment should not be regarded as a condition⁵ of development... but one should always approach environment from the point of view of the relationship which exists between the child and its environment at a given stage of his development (Vygotsky 1994, p. 338).

⁴In Russian original text the term начальная форма is used (Vygotsky 2001, p. 83) which might be translated as “incipient form”.

⁵In the Russian text the word обстановка (surrounding) was used: Среду следует рассматривать при этом не как обстановку развития... (Vygotsky 2001, p. 71). Condition in Russian is условие.

Two valuable points should be mentioned in regard to this citation. First, Vygotsky approaches the problem of environment from its role in child development (social formation of mind) and second, what is important is not the social environment per se, but *the relationship* between the child and his or her social environment. This statement has direct connections with the concept of the “social situation of development” as a starting point of Vygotsky’s considerations. However, what is the most important indicator of this relationship between the child and the environment? Vygotsky continues:

...the essential factors⁶ which explain the influence of environment⁷ on the psychological development of children, and on the development of their conscious personalities, are made up of their... *perezhivaniya*⁸ The... *perezhivanie*, arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment,⁹ determines what kind of influence this situation or this environment will have on the child. Therefore, it is not any of the factors¹⁰ in themselves (if taken without reference to the child) which determines how they will influence the future course of his development, but the same factors¹¹ refracted through the prism of the child’s... *perezhivanie* (Vygotsky 1994, p. 339–340).

To clarify this general theoretical statement Vygotsky continues with the following example:

We are dealing with three children, brought to us from one family. The external situation in this family is the same for all three children... The mother drinks and, as a result, apparently suffers from several nervous and psychological disorders. The children find themselves in a very difficult situation. When drunk, and during these breakdowns, the mother had once attempted to throw one of the children out of the window and she regularly beat them or threw them to the floor. In a word, the children are living in conditions of dread and fear due to these circumstances (Ibid).

Despite the fact that the external situation looks the same for all children, there are essential differences in respect to their development:

The three children are brought to our clinic, but each one of them presents a completely different picture of disrupted development, caused by the same situation. The same circumstances result in an entirely different picture for the three children (Ibid).

The youngest of these children

...reacts to the situation by developing a number of neurotic symptoms, i.e. symptoms of a defensive nature. He is simply overwhelmed by the horror of what is happening to him. As

⁶In the Russian text the word моменты (moments) is used: существенными моментами для определения влияния среды ... (Vygotsky 2001, p. 72). Factor in Russian is фактор.

⁷In the Russian text—для определения влияния среды (Vygotsky 2001, p. 72–73), which can be translated “for defining the influence of the environment”.

⁸Here the word perezhivanie is used in plural form—«переживания».

⁹Perezhivanie of certain situation, perezhivanie of any part of this environment—«переживание какой-нибудь ситуации, переживание какой-нибудь части среды» in the Russian text (Vygotsky 2001, p. 73).

¹⁰Moment (момент) in the Russian original (Ibid).

¹¹The same, moment (момент) in the Russian original (Ibid).

a result, he develops attacks of terror, enuresis and he develops a stammer, sometimes being unable to speak at all as he loses his voice. In other words, the child's reaction amounts to a state of complete depression and helplessness in the face of this situation. (Ibid)

The second child approached the situation differently. He was

...developing an extremely agonizing condition, a state of inner conflict... On the one hand, from the child's point of view, the mother is an object of painful attachment,¹² and on the other, she represents a source of all kinds of terrors and terrible emotional experiences [perezhivaniya] for the child.¹³ The second child was brought to us with this kind of deeply pronounced conflict and a sharply colliding internal contradiction expressed in a simultaneously positive and negative attitude towards the mother, a terrible attachment to her and an equally terrible hate for her,¹⁴ combined with terribly contradictory behaviour. He asked to be sent home immediately, but expressed terror when the subject of his going home was brought up (Vygotsky 1994, p. 340).

Finally, the third and eldest child

...showed signs of some precocious maturity, seriousness and solicitude. He already understood the situation. He understood that their mother was ill and he pitied her. He could see that the younger children found themselves in danger when their mother was in one of her states of frenzy. And he had a special role. He must calm his mother down, make certain that she is prevented from harming the little ones and comfort them. Quite simply, he has become the senior member of the family, the only one whose duty it was to look after everyone else. As a result of this, the entire course of his development underwent a striking change. This was not a lively child with normal, lively, simple interests, appropriate to his age and exhibiting a lively level of activity. It was a child whose course of normal development was severely disrupted, a different type of child (Vygotsky 1994, p. 340–341).

How can one explain why exactly the same environmental conditions exert three different types of influence on these three different children?

It can be explained because each of the children has a different attitude to the situation... Each of the children experienced¹⁵ the situation in a different way. One of them experienced it as an inexplicable, incomprehensible horror which has left him in a state of defenselessness. The second was experiencing it consciously, as a clash between his strong attachment, and his no less strong feeling of fear, hate and hostility. And the third child experienced it, to some extent, as far as it is possible for a 10–11 year old boy, as a misfortune which has befallen the family and which required him to put all other things

¹²In the Russian original the expression «предмет большой привязанности» (object of great/intensive attachment) is used (Vygotsky 2001, p. 73–74).

¹³In the Russian text «источник самых тяжёлых впечатлений» (a source of all kinds of... terrible impressions for the child) is used (Ibid). Nothing is said about emotional experience or perzhivanie in this sentence.

¹⁴In the Russian original “страшной привязанности к ней и страшной ненависти к ней” (a terrific attachment to her and an equally terrific hate for her). The word страшной here means the degree of attachment (“deep”, “intensive”, “strong”, “terrific”), not the character of it (“dangerous” or “terrible”).

¹⁵Everywhere in this quote the Russian verb perezhival (переживал) is used. This is the past singular grammatical form of the verb perezhivat' (переживать), from which the noun perzhivanie has been derived.

aside, to try somehow to mitigate the misfortune and to help both the sick mother and the children (Vygotsky 1994, p. 341).

The conclusion is:

So... depending on the fact that the same situation had been experienced by the three children in three different ways,¹⁶ the influence which this situation exerted on their development also turns out to be different (Vygotsky 1994, p. 341).

Further, Vygotsky summarises the whole issue by saying that

... by citing this example, I only wished to clarify the idea that... paedology¹⁷ does not investigate the environment as such without regard to the child, but instead looks at the role and influence of the environment on the course of development. It ought to always be capable of finding the particular prism through which the influence of the environment on the child is refracted, i.e. *it ought to be able to find the relationship which exists between the child and its environment, the child's...perezhivanie*, in other words how a child becomes aware of, interprets, and emotionally relates to a certain event. This is such a prism which determines the role and influence of the environment on the development of...the child's character, his psychological development, etc. (Vygotsky 1994, p. 341)

He concludes the explanation of the example by a general statement, which returns us back to the concept of the social environment as a source of development.

...the influence of environment on child development will, along with other types of influences, have to be assessed by taking the degree of understanding, awareness and insight of what is going on in the environment into account (Vygotsky 1994, p. 343).

The environment exerts this influence... via the child's perezhivaniya, i.e. depending on how the child has managed to work out his inner attitude to the various aspects of the different situations occurring in the environment. The environment determines the type of development depending on the degree of awareness of this environment which the child has managed to reach (Ibid, p. 346).

3.2.3 Social Environment and Perezhivanie: Relations and Unresolved Problems

Vygotsky's example of perezhivanie allows to take a step forward in understanding the concept of the social environment as a source of mental development as it was developed in cultural-historical theory.

¹⁶In the Russian original text «у троих детей возникло три разных переживания одной и той же ситуации» (three different perezhivanie of the same situation appeared in three children) (Vygotsky 2001, p. 74–75).

¹⁷Paedology was the complex scientific discipline of child development, which existed in the Soviet Union from the 1920s to the mid 1930s and was banned by a Communist Party Decree in 1936. Vygotsky was one of the founders of paedology (for details see Schneuwly 1994 and Langford 2005).

First, the above example shows that perezhivanie is seen neither as a separate single psychological process, nor as function or a state of consciousness. Perezhivanie is not only an emotional experience, although it includes emotional components. As Vygotsky puts it, in perezhivanie there is an indivisible unity of personality and the social environment (personal characteristics and environmental characteristics) on the one hand, and the complex unity of different psychological processes including emotions, understanding, awareness, insights, thinking, memory, attitudes, addictions, inner conflicts, and even dread and fear, etc., on the other hand.

Second, in cultural-historical theory, perezhivanie is viewed not as an empirical fact about a given moment in time; it is understood from a *developmental*¹⁸ perspective. Describing this example on three pages of his paper, Vygotsky many times uses and repeats words and expressions like “child development,” “the psychological development of children,” “future course of his development,” “picture of disrupted development,” “the entire course of his development underwent a striking change,” “...whose course of normal development was severely disrupted,” “the situation exerted on their development,” “an influence of the environment on the course of development” and so on.

Third, perezhivanie “is a prism through which the influence of the environment on child development is refracted” and this is not a pure metaphor. What is important is that perezhivanie is a tool (concept) for analysing the influence of sociocultural environment not on the individual per se, but on the *process* of development of the individual. In other words, the environment determines the development of the individual through the individual’s perezhivanie of the environment (Vygotsky 1998, p. 294). This approach enlarges the cultural-historical understanding of development as it challenges the principle of reflection and introduces the principle of refraction. The developing individual is always a part of the social situation and the relation of the individual to the environment and the environment to the individual occurs through the perezhivanie of the individual (Vygotsky 1998, p. 294).

Refraction is a principle, which shows the dialectical relations of the social and the individual in the process of development. The social becomes the individual, but the dialectics of this becoming are that only those components of the social environment that are refracted by the perezhivanie of the individual achieve developmental significance (Vygotsky 1998, p. 294).

This principle shows how the same social environment affects the unique developmental trajectories of different individuals. The example of the three children shows that the same social environment, being differently refracted through the perezhivanie of the three different children, brought about three different developmental outcomes and individual developmental trajectories. In a certain sense, it would not be an exaggeration to say that the social environment as a source of

¹⁸By developmental perspective I mean a sociocultural genesis of human mind, the process of “how the social becomes the individual” (Vygotsky 1998, p. 198).

development of the individual exists only when the individual participates actively in this environment, by acting, interacting, interpreting, understanding, recreating and redesigning it. An individual's *perezhivanie* makes the social situation into the social situation of development.

To state a certain, general, formal position it would be correct to say that the environment determines the development of the child through experience¹⁹ of the environment;... the child is a part of the social situation, and the relation of the child to the environment and the environment to the child occurs through experience.²⁰.. of the child himself; the forces of the environment acquire a controlling significance because the child experiences²¹ them (Vygotsky 1998, p. 294).

So, without the concept of *perezhivanie* it is hardly possible to understand the psychological content of the concepts of “social situation of development” and “the interaction between ideal and present forms”. Only by being taken together can these *three* concepts create the complete psychological content of the idea of the social environment as a source of mental development in its wholeness.

On the other hand, identifying the place and the theoretical content of the concept of *perezhivanie* (P2) and the principle of refraction in relation to these two fundamental concepts creates two more theoretical and methodological challenges.

The *first* challenge is related to interactions of ideal and present forms and looks as a contradiction. On one hand, as I discussed earlier, the interaction between the ideal and present forms is defined as a distinguishing feature and “the greatest peculiarity of child development” (Vygotsky 2001, p. 113). On the other hand, it contradicts to the definition of interaction of the ideal and present forms as “the very essence of cultural development” (Vygotsky 1997a, p. 99). No features of a certain process, even distinguishing ones cannot be considered as its essence.

The *second* theoretical challenge is related to the concept of social situation of development. Social situation of development is a system of unique and dynamic relationship of a child and her social environment, which occurs through *perezhivanie*. This means that social situation of development exists as a unique and dynamic unity of child's individual characteristics and various aspects of social environment. Yet, what is the psychological content of this unity? Are there any ways to study this unity and are there any tools of analysis of the structure and dynamics of this unity? In the following two sections of this chapter I will try to present my arguments and discuss possible ways of improving the theoretical content of the concept of *perezhivanie* so as to resolve these two challenges.

¹⁹“Переживание” is used in Russian original (Vygotsky 2001, p. 214).

²⁰The same, «переживание» in Russian original (Ibid).

²¹«Переживает» in Russian original text (Ibid).

3.3 Perezhivanie and General Genetic Law of Cultural Development

Is the interaction of ideal and present form a distinguishing feature of the cultural development of a child or it is a very essence of cultural development? It seems that in order to find the answer we need to “zoom out” the focus of our theoretical lens and take a look at the general genetic law of cultural development and how this law is related to the concept of perezhivanie.

The general genetic law of the cultural development of higher functions is the basic and fundamental law in cultural-historical theory. However, there is something which I hope can bring a new perspective to this topic.²²

3.3.1 General Genetic Law, Drama and Perezhivanie

General genetic law of cultural development says:

“...every function in the cultural development of the child appears on the stage twice, in two planes, first, the social, then the psychological, first between people as an intermental category, then within the child as a intramental category...Genetically, social relations, real relations of people, stand behind all the higher mental functions and their relations (Vygotsky 1997b, p. 106)

According to this law, every function appears firstly on the social plane, among people. However, social relations are not the “area,” not the field, and not the “level” where mental functions appear. The social relations *themselves* become the individual functions:

“...every higher mental function was external because it was social before it became an internal strictly mental function; it was formerly a social relation between two people (Vygotsky 1997b, p. 106)

However, if *every* higher mental function was a social relation between people, does it mean that *every* social relation becomes a mental function? The answer in cultural-historical theory is no. Cultural-historical theory has a clear notion of what specific types of social relations can become a mental function. In a word, these are “dramatic” social relations. I am referring to the term “category.”²³

In Russian, the term «категория» has different meanings. One of them is a synonym of “rank.” For example, in 1924, when Vygotsky moved to Moscow and started his scientific career, his first official position at Moscow State Institute of Experimental psychology was “the scientific worker of second category”

²²I undertook detailed analysis of the formulation of the general genetic law in my previous publications (Veresov 2004, 2005, 2010, 2014), so here I just repeat it in brief with the main emphasis on what is necessary for the topic of this Chapter.

²³Категория (Vygotsky 1983, p. 145).

(Vygodskaia and Lifanova 1999, p. 58²⁴). Another possible meaning of категория originates from Hegel's philosophy and refers to the notion of "the concept". For example, in *Thinking and Speech*, Vygotsky uses the word "categorical thinking" as a synonym of "thinking with concepts" (Vygotsky 1987, p. 84–88).

Which of these two meanings is valid referring to the formulation of the general genetic law of development in Vygotsky's theory? The best way is to try to find an answer in Vygotsky's texts. The first quotation refers to the requirement of experimental research of psychological processes:

Processes must be analyzed, and through analysis, the true relation that lies at the base of these processes, behind the external form of their manifestation, must be disclosed (Vygotsky 1997b, p. 70).

The key words here are "the true relation". Yet, what does it mean to disclose the "true relation," and what kind of relation is this "true relation"?

Genetically, social relations, real relations of people, stand behind all the higher functions... From this, one of the basic principles...is the principle of division of functions among people, the division into two of what is now merged into one, the experimental unfolding of a higher mental process into the drama that occurs among people (Vygotsky 1997b, p. 106).

In the *Concrete Human psychology* written in 1929 (Vygotsky 1989) this is given in a specified way:

Renewed division into two of what had been fused in one (Cf. modern labor), the experimental unfolding of a higher process...into a small drama (p. 59).

This is followed by a general conclusion

...the basic principle of the functioning of higher functions... is social, entailing interaction of functions, in place of interaction between people. They can be most fully developed in the form of *drama* (Ibid).

Thus, for Vygotsky, "drama which occurs among people" is "an inter-mental (social) plane of higher mental functions." Inter-mental social relation is not an ordinary social relation between the two individuals. This is a social relation that appears as a social collision, the contradiction between two people, a dramatic event, a drama between two individuals. Being emotionally and mentally experienced as social drama (on the social plane) it later becomes the individual intra-psychological category (on the psychological plane). Aspects of the relations between inter-and intra- psychological functions as discussed here, are also presented in Fleer and Fleer and March (March and Fleer, this Volume), but in the context of emotions and emotion regulation. The inter-mental "category," i.e. an emotionally experienced collision might bring radical changes to the individual's mind, and therefore it is a sort of act of development of mental functions—the individual becomes different, he rises higher and above his own behaviour. Without internal drama, an intra-mental category, such kinds of mental changes are hardly possible. So, the term "drama" is a

²⁴In Russian «научный работник второй категории».

key word here. The second key word is *perezhivanie*. As there is no dramatic collision without such critical perezhivanie, there is no development without *perezhivanie*. Drama (social collision) and perezhivanie are essential for understanding how the general genetic law of development works, how the social becomes the individual.

Coming back to Vygotsky's example with the three children and their mother, we can see that the concept of dramatic event is very important: in the same social situation, three children had three different perezhivanie and therefore experienced three different dramas. This means that the initial inter-mental forms of their relations were essentially different in the same social situation. Consequently, because the initial inter-mental forms were different, the children's social situations of development and their individual developmental trajectories became different.

So, according to the general genetic law of cultural development, every higher mental function appears twice—first it appears as a social relation in the form of experienced *external* dramatic collision. Therefore, perezhivanie is not only a kind of prism which refracts the interaction of the ideal and present form. The concept of perezhivanie determines the very essence of such an interaction. Perezhivanie is the personal way of experiencing a dramatic event (inter-mental category). It is a form in which this dramatic event is experienced (refracted) by an individual.

So, the theoretical content of the concept of perezhivanie (P2) would remain incomplete without “zooming out” and identifying its relations with the general genetic law of cultural development. And vice versa, the content of the general genetic law remain unclear without a link to the concept of perezhivanie. I believe such “zooming out” resolves *the first* theoretical challenge. Yes, interaction of ideal and present forms is a distinguishing feature of human cultural development. However, the collision, the dramatic confrontation of these two forms refracted through critical perezhivanie is the very essence of the process of cultural development.

The very essence of cultural development consists in a confrontation of developed cultural forms of behavior which confront the child and primitive forms that characterize his own behavior. (Vygotsky 1997b, p. 99)

Interaction not always happens in a form of collision and confrontation, but dramatic collisions and confrontations are dialectical contradictions, which are moving forces of a process of development. Dialectical contradictions are a very essence of development; dialectical contradictions of inter-mental and intra-mental planes are the very essence of a child cultural development. The concept of perezhivanie is a tool to discover the dialectical process of how inter-mental becomes intra-mental, how the “social becomes the individual” (Veresov 2016b).

3.4 Perezhivanie as a Unit of Analysis

In this section of the chapter I will present my arguments in response to the second theoretical challenge related to rethinking of the theoretical content of the concept of *perezhivanie*. As I said earlier, rethinking the content of P2 in relation to the social as a source of development generates a question: Social situation of development is a system of unique and dynamic relationship of a child and her social environment, which occurs through *perezhivanie*. This means that social situation of development exists as a unique and dynamic unity of child's individual characteristics and various aspects of social environment. Yet, what is the psychological content of this unity? Are there any ways to study this unity and are there any tools of analysis of the structure and dynamics of this unity? I believe we can find the answer if we take a look on the idea of the units of analysis as it is developed in cultural-historical theory.

3.4.1 *Unity and Unit: Analysis by Units*

Before coming to this point, it is necessary to explain the difference between three terms, namely “unity,” “unit,” and “element”.

There are two terms in Russian—единство (unity) and единица (unit). The first, единство [edinstvo] (unity), is used when we speak about a complex whole, a complex system consisting of a number of parts, components, elements etc.²⁵ One of the meanings of the second term, единица [edinita] (unit), is a part, a component, or an element of a certain complex whole. In other words, “unity” (единство) is used in relation to the whole, whereas “unit” is often related to the parts of the whole. If we put it in general way, we could say that a certain system (the complex whole) in its unity (единство) consists of certain units (единица).

Very often all these terms—parts, components, units, elements—are used as synonyms. However, Vygotsky clearly distinguished two main types of analysis in psychology which underlie two main approaches to the investigation of mental formations (Vygotsky 1987). The first of these approaches is the decomposition of the complex mental whole into its elements. This type of analysis can be compared with a chemical analysis of water in which water is decomposed into hydrogen and oxygen. The essential feature of this form of analysis is that its products are of a different nature than the whole from which they were derived. The elements lack the characteristics inherent in the whole and they possess properties that it does not possess (Vygotsky 1987, p. 45).

When the researchers approaches development of a complex whole by decomposing of the whole into elements, he

²⁵For example in Russian “consciousness is a unity of affect and intellect” is “сознание есть единство аффекта и интеллекта”.

...adopts the strategy of the man who resorts to the decomposition of water into hydrogen and oxygen in his search for a scientific explanation of the characteristics of water, its capacity to extinguish fire or its conformity to Archimedes law for example. This man will discover, to his chagrin, that hydrogen burns and oxygen sustains combustion. He will never succeed in explaining the characteristics of the whole by analyzing the characteristics of its elements (Vygotsky 1987, p. 45).

Vygotsky explains that a psychology that decomposes the complex mental whole into its elements in an attempt to explain its characteristics will search in vain for the unity that is characteristic of the whole. These characteristics are inherent in the phenomenon only as a unified whole. “When the whole is analyzed into its elements, these characteristics evaporate. In his attempt to reconstruct these characteristics, the investigator is left with no alternative but to search for external, mechanical forms of interaction between the elements” (Vygotsky 1987, p. 45).

An entirely different form of analysis is the partitioning of the complex whole into *units*.

In contrast to the element, *the unit* (1) possesses all the basic characteristics of the whole, and (2) is a “vital and further indivisible part of the whole” (Vygotsky 1982, p. 16).²⁶

The key to the explanation of the characteristics of water lies not in the investigation of its chemical formula but in the investigation of its molecule and its molecular movements. In precisely the same sense, the living cell is the real unit of biological analysis because it preserves the basic characteristics of life that are inherent in the living organism (Vygotsky 1987, p. 46).

What does this mean for psychology and psychological analysis? The conclusion Vygotsky drew is that a psychology concerned with the study of the *complex whole* must comprehend the necessity of analysis by units and not elements. In other words, psychology must identify those units in which the characteristics of the whole are present (Vygotsky 1987, p. 47).

3.4.2 *Perezhivanie a Unit of Personal and Environmental Characteristics*

Let us take a look at two quotations from Vygotsky’s key works related to *perezhivanie*.

The first quotation is from *The Problem of Environment*:

Perezhivanie is a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented, i.e. that which is being experienced—*perezhivanie* is always related to something which is found outside the person—and on the other hand, what is represented is

²⁶Here Vygotsky’s words “далее неразложимыми живыми частями этого единства” (further indivisible part of the whole) were mistakenly translated as “irreducible part of the whole” (Vygotsky 1987, p. 46).

how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in perezhivanie.... So, in perezhivanie we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics, which are represented in the perezhivanie (Vygotksy 1994, p. 342).

At first glance, it looks controversial as perezhivanie is presented as a unit (in the first sentence) and as a unity (in the last sentence). However, there is no contradiction here. In a molecule of water we deal with an indivisible unity of oxygen and hydrogen. This makes a molecule of water a unit of analysis of the whole unity (water). The living cell is a unit of biological analysis as in this unit we are dealing with a unity of the living organism. In line with this, perezhivanie is not the unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics; it is a unit, a “vital and further indivisible part of the whole” unity of personal and situational characteristics, which retains all its basic features and qualities. Perezhivanie itself is not the unity, but in perezhivanie we are dealing with an indivisible unity of personal and situational characteristics like in a molecule of water we deal with the unity of oxygen and hydrogen (water).

The second quotation is from *The Crisis at Age Seven*. The English text shows perezhivanie as a unity of environment and personality (Vygotksy 1998, p. 294). However, comparison with the Russian original text (Vygotksy 1984, p. 382) which I give in parallel, shows a radically different picture (Table 3.1).

So, there is nowhere that Vygotksy speaks about perezhivanie as a unity of personal and situational characteristics; perezhivanie is presented not as a unity (единство), but as a unit (единица) of the personality and the environment, as an internal relation to reality.

Table 3.1 Parallel translation 1

Vygotksy (1998), Vol. 5, p. 294	Vygotksy (1984), Vol. 4, p. 382 ^a
A <i>unity</i> can be noted in the study of personality and environment. This <i>unity</i> in psychopathology and psychology has been called <i>experience</i> . The child’s <i>experience</i> is also this kind of very simple <i>unity</i> about which we must not say that in itself it represents the influence of the environment on the child or the individuality of the child himself; <i>experience</i> is the <i>unity</i> of the personality and the environment as it is represented in development. Thus, in development, the unity of environmental and personality factors <i>is achieved</i> in a series of <i>experiences</i> of the child. <i>Experience</i> must be understood as the <i>external</i> relation of the child as a person to one factor or another of reality	A <i>unit</i> can be noted in the study of personality and environment. This <i>unit</i> in psychopathology and psychology has been called <i>perezhivanie</i> . The child’s <i>perezhivanie</i> is also this kind of very simple <i>unit</i> about which we must not say that in itself it represents the influence of the environment on the child or the individuality of the child himself; <i>perezhivanie</i> is the <i>unit</i> of the personality and the environment as it is represented in development. Thus, in development, the unity of environmental and personality factors <i>happens</i> in a series of <i>perezhivanie</i> of the child. <i>Perezhivanie</i> must be understood as the <i>internal</i> relation of the child as a person to one factor or another of reality

^aMy translation from Russian

3.4.3 *Perezhivanie a Unit of Human Consciousness*

Perezhivanie was introduced by Vygotsky as a unit of human consciousness. In Table 3.2, the English text does not say anything about perezhivanie as a unit of human consciousness, it positions perezhivanie as a unity and therefore the difference between “unity,” “unit,” and “element” disappears. The Russian original text provides us with much better opportunity for understanding. Thus, (1) consciousness is a unity and perezhivanie is a unit of consciousness; (2) attention and thinking are not units since the basic properties of consciousness are not given, they are elements of consciousness whereas perezhivanie is a dynamic unit of consciousness.

Given that perezhivanie is a unit of the environmental and personal characteristics as the first quotation shows (let us call it Unit1) and it is a unit of human consciousness, which comes from the second quote (Unit2), could we conclude that in Vygotsky’s understanding consciousness and the unity of environmental and personal characteristics is the same? Or to put it another way, is human consciousness and the unity of environmental and personal characteristics one and the same complex living whole? And, if not, how is it possible that perezhivanie is a unit of analysis of both?

We do not have any evidence in Vygotsky’s published texts on the similarity between the two. Yet, there is a difference. It seems the way to recognise the difference is to apply a developmental approach which means to look at a concept as a result of generalisation. “At any stage of its development, the concept is an act

Table 3.2 Parallel translation 2

Vygotsky (1998), p. 294	Vygotsky (1984), p. 382 ^a
All <i>experience</i> is always <i>experience</i> of something. There is no <i>experience</i> that would not be <i>experience</i> of something just as there is no act of consciousness that would not be an act of being conscious of something But every <i>experience</i> is my <i>experience</i> . In modern theory, <i>experience</i> is introduced as a <i>unity</i> of consciousness, that is, a <i>unity</i> in which the basic properties of consciousness are given as such, while in attention and in thinking, the connection of consciousness is not given. Attention is not a <i>unity</i> of consciousness, but is an element of consciousness in which there is no series of other elements, while the unity of consciousness as such disappears, and experience is the <i>actual dynamics of the unity of consciousness</i> , that is, the whole which comprises consciousness	Every <i>perezhivanie</i> is always a <i>perezhivanie</i> of something. There is no <i>perezhivanie</i> that would not be a <i>perezhivanie</i> of something just as there is no act of consciousness that would not be an act of being conscious of something But every <i>perezhivanie</i> is my <i>perezhivanie</i> . In modern theory, <i>perezhivanie</i> is introduced as a <i>unit</i> of consciousness, that is, a <i>unit</i> in which the basic properties of consciousness are given as such, while in attention and in thinking, the connection of consciousness is not given. Attention is not a <i>unit</i> of consciousness, but is an element of consciousness in which there is no series of other elements, while the unity of consciousness as such disappears, and <i>perezhivanie</i> is the <i>actual dynamic unit of consciousness</i> , that is, the consciousness consists of <i>perezhivanie</i>

^aMy translation from Russian original

of generalization” (Vygotsky 1987, p. 169). In other words, concepts are the result of generalising, or better to say, conceptualising a certain reality. A concept has its theoretical content; however, conceptualisation never happens in empty space, on nothing. What we conceptualise is not less important than how we conceptualise. This moves us back to P1.

As we do have two meanings of P1—(1) *perezhivanie* as an act, a process of experiencing and (2) *perezhivanie* as the content, as what is experienced, we might presume that Unit1 is a result of conceptualisation of P1.1 and Unit2 is a result of conceptualisation of P1.2. This difference, the difference between P1.1 and P1.2, might be illustrated by an analogy of thinking—*how* we think (the process of thinking) is not the same as *what* we think (the content, thoughts). From here Unit1 is related to the process of experiencing and therefore is a unit of analysis of the unity of environmental and personal characteristics. Unit2 is a result of conceptualisation of *perezhivanie* as the content of what happens in individual consciousness and this makes it a unit of consciousness (Veresov and Fleer 2016, p. 9).

3.5 Back to *Perezhivanie* as P2; Bringing It All Together

The aim of this chapter is to initiate a further discussion on the theoretical content and context of the concept of *perezhivanie* as a possible (and I think, necessary) step forward in the transformation of a tantalising notion into a concept with clear meaning (Smagorinsky 2011, p. 339). In doing this we have to make an important distinction between the two meanings of *perezhivanie* presented in Vygotsky’s original texts—*perezhivanie* as a *psychological phenomena/process* which can be empirically observed and studied (P1) and *perezhivanie* as a *concept, a theoretical tool* for analysis of the process of development (P2). I think, this distinction is an important step forward in developing the generative understanding of the concept of *perezhivanie* within the cultural-historical theoretical framework.

This chapter is an attempt to disclose the theoretical content of *perezhivanie* as a concept (P2) in two main directions: (1) how is this concept related to the process of cultural development, and (2) what is the place of this concept in the system of other concepts and principles of cultural-historical theory. In other words, the aim of this chapter is to unpack Vygotsky’s words that “*perezhivanie* is a concept which allows us to study the role and influence of environment on the psychological development of children in the analysis of the laws of development” (Vygotsky 1994, p. 343).

The concept of *perezhivanie* is a powerful theoretical tool for researching the role of environment in mental development which allows us to understand the social environment *as a source* of development. It clarifies and enriches the theoretical content of social environment as a source of development stating that only those components of the social environment that are refracted through the *perezhivanie* of the individual achieve developmental significance. Hence, the concept of *perezhivanie* introduces the principle of refraction in contrast to the classical

principle of reflection. This new and revolutionary principle allows us to clarify the content of two other concepts—"the social situation of development" and "interaction of ideal and present forms". The social situation of development is a unique relation of the child to the environment, but what makes it unique is that the relation of the child to the environment and the environment to the child occurs through perezhivanie. This makes perezhivanie an important and decisive component of the social situation of development.

Development is a dialectical, complex and contradictory process of quantitative and qualitative changes. In relation to human development, in Vygotsky's words, higher mental functions "can be most fully developed in the form of drama" (Vygotsky 1989, p. 59). The general genetic law of cultural development emphasises the place and role of social (inter-psychological) drama as a first form of existence of higher mental functions (Vygotsky 1997b, p. 106). The social becomes the individual, but the transformation of inter-mental to intra-mental is not a linear process, it is not a direct transition because it happens through perezhivanie. Therefore, perezhivanie is not only a kind of prism which refracts the interaction of the ideal and present form. The concept of perezhivanie determines the very essence of such an interaction. Perezhivanie is the personal way of experiencing a dramatic event (inter-mental category). It is the form in which this dramatic event is refracted and experienced by an individual. The unique organisation and hierarchy of higher mental functions is the result of the unique dramatic inter-psychological collisions that have happened in the life of the human being and of the process of that human being overcoming them, the intra-psychological result of the individual's unique developmental trajectory. In overcoming social dramatic collisions (the dramas of life) a human being creates his/her unique architecture of personality. There is no development without drama, there is no drama without perezhivanie. Rethinking the theoretical content of the concept of perezhivanie might open a new direction in developing psychology in terms of drama (Vygotsky 1989, p. 71).

Perezhivanie is neither a unity of individual and environmental characteristics, nor a unity of human consciousness. First, it is a unit, a "vital and further indivisible part of the whole" unity of personal and situational characteristics, which retains all its basic features and qualities. Perezhivanie itself is not the unity, but *in perezhivanie* we are dealing with an indivisible unity of personal and situational characteristics like *in a molecule of water* we deal with the unity of oxygen and hydrogen (water). This understanding of perezhivanie as a unit is a result of conceptualising perezhivanie a process of experiencing (P1.1). Second, perezhivanie as a dynamic unit of consciousness is a result of the theoretical conceptualisation of perezhivanie as content (P1.2).

In the late 1920s, Vygotsky wrote:

Theoretically, psychology has long since rejected the idea that development of the child is a purely quantitative process. All agree that here we have a process that is much more complex, a process not exhausted by quantitative changes alone. But in practice, psychology is confronted with having to disclose this complex process of development in all its real completeness and to detect all those qualitative changes and transformations that refashion child behavior (Vygotsky 1997a, p. 98).

In my opinion, rethinking the theoretical content of the concept of perezhivanie constitutes a step forward in fixing the gap. Theoretical contribution of this chapter could be expressed in the following brief summary:

Perezhivanie is a powerful concept allowing us to study development in its dialectical complexity.

There is a dialectics in the process of sociocultural genesis of human mind—the dialectics of evolutionary and revolutionary aspects. Perezhivanie is a prism which refracts influences of social environment on child's development through interactions of ideal and present forms. However, this general statement needs further theoretical improvements. There is a special form of perezhivanie (we can call it a critical or dramatic perezhivanie) as a refraction of a dramatic collision which appears as a confrontation, a contradiction of an ideal and present form. Being refracted by critical perezhivanie it might bring qualitative changes to child's mental functions and therefore might bring changes to how the child becomes aware, interprets and relates to sociocultural environment. This in turn, reorganises the whole social situation of development. Social dramatic events, collisions refracted through critical perezhivanie produce qualitative changes and “turning points” in child's individual developmental trajectories. In this sense, the concept of critical perezhivanie is an analytical tool which unfolds the dialectics evolutionary and revolutionary aspects of development as well as dialectics of the social and the individual (Veresov 2016a, 2016b).

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