

NIKOLAI VERESOV

Leading Activity in Developmental Psychology

Concept and Principle

In the analysis of any problem it is never superfluous at the very start to define, specify, or at least indicate the boundaries of the space of its conceivable content. Without this, any discussion is at risk of turning into a collection of definitions interspersed with empirical examples and arguments of a very subjective kind—that is, of becoming a discourse about words, a dispute over nothing. Such specification of boundaries, of course, gives no guarantee of the quality of the subsequent analysis. It does, however, make possible reflection over the substantiation at each step.

So before I proceed to the theme designated in the subtitle of the introduction I would like to indicate these boundaries. For this purpose I cite two quotations.

In the opinion of G.P. Shchedrovitskii, “the very terms ‘activity’ and ‘action,’ leaving aside their definition through schemas of reproduction, appear as expressions of strong idealizations and of excessive reductions and simplifications to which only extremely rare, artificially created, and exotic cases in real life may correspond.”¹ A

English translation © 2006 M.E. Sharpe, Inc., from the Russian text, “Vedushchaia deiatel’nost’ v psikhologii razvitiia: poniatie i printsip.”

Nikolai Veresov is a researcher at Kajaani University Consortium, Finland.

Translated by Stephen D. Shenfield.

rather pessimistic view; nevertheless, it would be by no means superfluous for representatives of the psychological theory of activity to pay heed to this opinion.

On the other hand, in the opinion of E.G. Iudin, the concept *activity* “fulfills real and not illusory constructive functions only insofar as it acquires object-related interpretation in one or another field of knowledge. Object-related interpretation requires the fulfillment of two important methodological conditions: First, it must give a specific reality within its specific boundaries; and second, this concept must be elaborated structurally with regard to a definite object of study.”²

An example of such an object-related interpretation (at least in developmental psychology) is the concept (and principle) of leading activity. In other words, if we analyze the concept of activity from this point of view, it makes sense to consider how it gives a specific reality (in the given case a developmental reality) within the boundaries of age intervals in ontogenesis and how it is elaborated structurally with regard to childhood development. It is self-evident that it makes sense to discuss both the potential and the limits of the principle of activity as an *explanatory* principle only on the basis of concrete scientific data.

We can put it a different way. The concept “leading activity” in developmental psychology is in a certain sense the *object-related interpretation* of a highly idealized and simplified, and therefore abstract, concept of activity in the specific reality given by itself within its specific boundaries. It is a structurally elaborated concept applied to a definite object of study, that is, to a developmental process in ontogenesis. Therefore, it is no coincidence that all serious discussions on the theme of the place and role of the concept (category) of activity, at least in psychology, necessarily focus, alongside other questions, on the problem of *leading activity*.³ Nowhere are the power, limitations, and explanatory potential (and the limits of this potential) of the concept of *activity* in psychology so clear and salient as they are in the concept and principle of leading activity. I note in passing that the principle of leading activity cannot and must not be understood, as it often is, as the banal concretization of a general idea (the idea of the leading role of activity in general) in relation to some set of empirical phenomena.

In order to clarify this point I would like to turn to one of the best-known periodizations in the world (and, perhaps, the best known in Russia) of psychic development in ontogenesis. I have in mind the periodization by age intervals proposed by D.B. Elkonin.⁴ I want right away to enter the reservation that I take this periodization not because I consider it better than other periodizations, and certainly not because I wish to counterpose it to these other approaches. No, I take it merely as an example of how contemporary developmental psychology is moving away from linear (evolutionary-chronological) toward nonlinear (organic-functional) models of development. I take it as an example in which the general picture is reflected as in a drop of water.

As is well known, this periodization was based on the idea that each age interval, as a unique and qualitatively special period of a person's life, is characterized above all by a definite *type of leading activity* and by the specific *new psychological formations* that emerge because of the former.

Within the system of a leading activity we discover a hidden contradiction (which comes to the surface only during psychological crises) between two aspects of that activity—the operational-technical and the emotional-motivational. Correspondingly, the general sequence of leading activities shows an alternation of activities marked by the predominant development first of one aspect and then of the other. Periods of predominant development of the sphere of motives and needs are followed by periods in which the predominant process is the formation of children's operational-technical capabilities, and vice versa. Thus, each stage of childhood consists of two periods that are interconnected in law-conforming fashion. It is opened by a period dominated by the mastering of tasks, motives, and norms of human activity and by development of the sphere of motives and needs (the subsystem "child–social adult"). This prepares the ground for transition to the second period, in which the predominant processes are the mastering of modes of action with objects and the formation of operational-technical capabilities (the subsystem "child–social object").

Here is what Elkonin himself wrote of this:

All three stages—early childhood, childhood, and adolescence—are constructed in accordance with the same principle and consist of two periods

that are connected in law-conforming fashion. The transition from one stage to the next occurs when a discrepancy arises between the operational-technical capabilities of the child and the tasks and motives of activity on the basis of which those capabilities were formed.⁵

Such, if I may put it this way, is the “framework” of Elkonin’s periodization by age interval. The ontogenesis of consciousness is regarded as a process of the uninterrupted succession of activities within the system “child–society”; for each age-related stage a *leading activity* is identified, and the most important *new psychological formations* of the given age interval are connected with the mastering of that activity.

At the same time, upon careful reading of the article, viewed, so to speak, by the “unwashed” eye, there arise a number of questions worthy of consideration. Although this exposes me to criticism, I shall say that at first glance it appears that Elkonin’s celebrated periodization is not free of contradiction.

The first set of possible questions may be the following. While the author says that his periodization of psychic development is based on the principle of *leading activity* (and refers in this context to A.N. Leontiev), he does not uphold this principle consistently. At least two periods in the development of the child are defined in terms of kinds of interpersonal communication: in infancy (from birth to one year) the leading activity is direct emotional communication,⁶ in adolescence it is “communicative activity consisting in the building of relations with companions on the basis of definite moral-ethical norms.”⁷ True, as D.I. Feldstein writes, “subsequently, D.B. Elkonin agreed with our conclusions to the effect that the leading activity in adolescence is expanded socially recognized and socially approved activity.”⁸ That may be so (although I have great doubts on this score), but, turn and twist as you will, it is hard to call direct emotional communication in infancy an activity (not even a leading activity, but simply an activity in Leontiev’s sense). You can, of course, point out that communication is a special kind of activity, but this will hardly persuade anyone, if only because a leading activity (activity as understood by Leontiev) has a definite structure (tasks, actions, operations, and so on). And even references to some kind of special *object-orientation* of the infant’s direct emotional

communication with an adult seem either great exaggerations or very strained interpretations.

We may also ask why the periodization marks out *precisely these* kinds of activity, in *this particular order* and sequence, and within *these particular* age ranges. Is it really so absurd to suppose that play activity, once having emerged, may remain a leading activity for the rest of a person's life? Not only many actors might agree with this, but also, for example, William Shakespeare, who wrote that "all the world's a stage." And why not suppose that the formation of learning activity (as a leading activity) is possible *not only* in the early years of school but also later? At any rate, there are no grounds for asserting that this is impossible in principle. And, finally, returning to the period of infancy, it does not seem to me groundless to hypothesize that the first activity that the child masters is his activity to control the behavior of the adult—an activity accomplished with the aid of semiotic means generated by the child himself.⁹ As it happens, quite unexpectedly (and most of all for psychologists) this idea was substantiated in an elegant and at the same time profound fashion in philosophical-anthropological terms.¹⁰ The first and original activity in sociogenesis is the activity of control, for without this it is quite meaningless to speak of purposive and volitional (i.e., free) activity.¹¹ I do not know whether Elkonin himself would have agreed with this. I just remind the reader that he often used to say that it is not so much the family that socializes the child as the child who socializes the people around him in his attempt to construct a comfortable and pleasant world for himself. And this, by the way, brings him close to the position of D. Winnicott¹²—an investigator very far from activity theory.

And so, it appears at first glance that Elkonin's periodization may be criticized as inconsistent and even, to a certain extent, contradictory.

But *this is only at first glance*. These criticisms are possible only under two conditions.

The first condition: One may call Elkonin's periodization inconsistent if one forgets (or does not want to remember) that Daniil Borisovich himself wrote, and more than once, that this periodization is no more than a *hypothesis* that, of course, has a certain experimental basis. The article itself ends with the following words: "Only

further research will show to what extent our hypothesis correctly reflects the reality of children's psychic development."¹³ And Elkonin is not to blame if some people have taken his periodization not as a hypothesis, that is, something *open* to further development, clarification, and analysis, but as a dogma, an ultimate truth beyond criticism.

The second condition: One may call Elkonin's periodization inconsistent if one proceeds from a *specific and superficial* understanding of the text of his article and of the ideas contained in it. The periodization *looks* inconsistent if the reader does not know (or does not want to know) in what context—both theoretical and, most important, historical—this work of Elkonin exists.

At first glance, this periodization is an example of the linear, stage-based approach to the understanding of development—true, with a clear demarcation not only of periods but (this is especially important) of the criteria and grounds for such a demarcation and of the mechanisms, that is, inner contradictions that bring about this development (transition from one stage to the next). Incidentally, the enormous volume of literature devoted to this periodization treats it precisely thus.

But is a different view, a different reading possible? Let us try, as a first step, to identify the basic concepts upon which the periodization is constructed.

The list of such concepts may look like this:

- psychic development (as the transition from one qualitatively unique stage to another);
- psychological age (as a qualitative stage in development);
- leading activity (defining the direction and path of development at each stage);
- contradiction between the operational-technical and the emotional-motivational aspects of activity (as the mechanism of development); and
- new psychological formations of an age interval (as the result of development).

Now we shall examine some of these concepts in greater detail.

Leading activity. As is well known, this concept was elaborated by Leontiev and taken by Elkonin as the basis for his periodization. Let us recall in this connection how a leading activity was defined in

Leontiev's works: "Each stage of psychic development is characterized by a definite relation of the child to reality that is leading at the given stage, by a definite leading type of his activity."

Consequently, Leontiev wrote, "it is necessary to speak of the development of the psyche depending not on activity in general but on leading activity."¹⁴

Developing this approach, Leontiev gave an elaborated characterization of a leading activity. First, it is an activity within which other, new kinds of activity emerge and become differentiated. Second, it is an activity within which special psychic processes are formed or rearranged. And third, it is an activity on which the basic psychological changes in the child's personality observed at a given period of development very closely depend. "Thus, a leading activity is an activity the development of which conditions the most important changes in the child's psychic processes and psychological personality traits at a given stage of his development."¹⁵

Let us break off for a moment and pose a question. Does development occur in periods of age-related crisis? Of course, people will answer me, development occurs both in critical and in noncritical periods. In noncritical periods quantitative changes gradually accumulate, and in critical periods qualitative leaps take place.

But if *qualitative* changes in consciousness, that is, new psychological formations of the personality arise as a result of a leading activity and depend on it, then does this mean that qualitative leaps in development take place *not in periods* of age-related crisis (when the "old" leading activity no longer exists and a "new" one does not yet exist) but in noncritical periods? An unexpected question, perhaps, but let us ponder it. If one leading activity replaces another and at periods of age-related crisis there is no leading activity, then it obviously follows that development does not occur in these critical periods. Consequently, "leading activity" describes development not in periods when qualitative leaps take place but in periods when quantitative changes occur.

True, it may be objected that there is no contradiction here and that a leading activity (or more precisely, the child's mastering of this activity) in noncritical periods prepares the ground for those qualitative leaps (new psychological formations) that take place in

the child's consciousness during periods of crisis. However, I still think that there is a contradiction here—but only if we understand development *precisely as* a linear, stage-by-stage process of *succession* of leading activities, with one leading activity replacing another.¹⁶

Daniil Borisovich himself, it seems to me, recognized this best of all. I even have suspicions that, having written this article, in his subsequent works (especially in his diary notes, which have now been published), he was simply teaching us how to read this article—not to “read into” it our own ideas, as often happens with classical scientific texts, but, I stress, to “read out” of it what it really contains.¹⁷

Bearing this in mind, let us simply reread Elkonin's article. And let us continue to analyze the concept “leading activity,” trying to reconstruct its sense. In his scientific diary Elkonin writes: “It is necessary to look at what we call a type of activity not as object-oriented activity (its object may be things or people as things), but as a form of the relations of child and society.”¹⁸

The object-orientation of activity is, of course, a separate theme, but let us pay attention here to the fact that Elkonin sets the task of looking at activity precisely as a *form of the relations* of child and society. So what is strange about that? At first glance, indeed, nothing—especially if we compare this statement with the quotation cited above from Leontiev about leading activity, where the latter is defined as “the leading relation of the child to reality.” But Elkonin does not just insistently repeat this phrase: he transfers it to a different context.¹⁹ Of course, “relation” and “form of relations” are not one and the same thing. However, my “suspicions” have, it seems to me, a more serious basis than that of nitpicking comparisons between quotations torn out of context. Let us do it another way and simply try to bring to light or reconstruct this “different” and, so it seems to me, broader context. This is useful in any case.

And here Lev Semenovich Vygotsky comes to our aid. It appears to me that in speaking of activity as a form of relations Elkonin is referring us to Vygotsky's classical concept of the social situation of development.

Toward the beginning of each age period, a quite unique relation takes shape that is specific, peculiar, and exclusive to the given age, between the child and the reality around him, first of all the social reality. We shall

call this relation the *social situation of development* at the given age. The social situation of development is the starting point for all the dynamic changes that occur in development during the given age period. It fully determines those forms and that path that by following the child successively acquires new properties of his personality, drawing them from social reality as the main source of development, that path along which the social becomes individual.²⁰

Let us turn our attention to one circumstance. Vygotsky speaks here not of activity, let alone of leading activity, but precisely of the *relation BETWEEN the child and his social environment*. But Elkonin, speaking of activity, insists that the latter is a form of the relations of child *AND* society. The difference in contexts here is that while for Vygotsky the social situation of development is characterized by a definite leading type of relation between child and social environment, for Leontiev a leading activity is a “relation of the child *TO* reality.” And here, of course, we cannot fail to recall the well-known statement that “activity is not only a relation *TO* reality, but also a relation *IN* reality,” that activity is a *real* form (and for Leontiev’s approach perhaps the sole real form) of such a relation.

A second subtlety is that for Leontiev these two concepts—leading activity and social situation of development—are virtual synonyms: “Leontiev, while distorting nothing in the essence of Vygotsky’s approach to the conditions of a person’s development, replaced the term ‘social situation’ with the concept of the development of activity.”²¹

Absolutely respecting the opinion of V.V. Davydov, as I do, I beg to disagree. Possibly they were synonyms for Leontiev, but Elkonin appears to have had a different opinion and separated these concepts quite unambiguously. For example, in his book *Introduction to Childhood Psychology* [Vvedenie v detskuiu psikhologiiu], in the chapter “The Problem of Periodization of Childhood Development” [Problema periodizatsii detskogo razvitiia], he stated directly:

Each age, or period, is characterized by the following indicators:

- 1) a *definite social situation of development* or the concrete form of relations with adults into which the child enters in the given period;
- 2) a *basic or leading type of activity* . . .
- 3) *basic new psychic formations* . . .

The indicators enumerated are interrelated in complex ways.²²

Let us try to understand what these relations are and what is complex about them. Here, it probably makes sense to refer to my own research on this theme.

Investigating the process of the emergence of learning activity and of its preconditions, I was able to demonstrate on the basis of experimental data that “social situation of development” and “leading activity” do not fully coincide with one another. A new leading activity *does not arise directly on the basis* of the old leading activity. Learning activity, for instance, does not arise directly from play activity. It arises in the depths of the entire social situation of development of the preschooler. For however play activity may have developed, in and of itself (outside of the general social situation of development) it is incapable of turning into learning activity.

The preconditions for the emergence of learning activity are by no means formed exclusively within play activity. These preconditions gradually mature (or are created) *within the entire* social situation of development of the preschooler. Thus, at elementary school age learning (as the new leading activity corresponding to this age) does not simply replace play (as the old leading activity no longer corresponding to this age)—for the elementary school child does not cease to play. Play creates a specific social situation of development in which the emergence of learning activity becomes possible.

Learning activity, having arisen in this social situation of development, rearranges the entire system of the child’s activities and creates a *new* social situation of development within which play too has a place. Play passes the “baton” to learning activity, ceding it the position of leading activity, but it does not do so directly. It leaves this baton, as it were, on the “field” of the social situation of development, on which the preconditions mature for the emergence of a learning activity that will be capable of picking up the baton.²³

But let us return to Elkonin. In turning to the concept of the social situation of development, Elkonin, in essence (albeit not openly), also refers us to another, more complex concept in Vygotsky’s theory—namely, to the concept of the *interaction of ideal and real forms*. Recall:

In none of the types of development known to me does it ever happen that at the moment when the initial form is taking shape . . . the higher, ideal

form, which appears at the end of development, should already be present and that it should interact directly with the first steps taken by the child along the path of development of this initial or primary form. Here lies the greatest peculiarity of childhood development in contrast to other types of development.²⁴

It seems to me that if we can speak at all of the closeness of concepts, then the concept “social situation of development,” to which Elkonin turns, is no less (if no more) akin to the concept of interaction of real and ideal forms in development. In any case, *relation between the child and the sociocultural world* (and thus also activity as the form of the relation of child and society) is almost a paraphrase of the expression “interaction of ideal and real forms.”

Is this not the source of Elkonin’s striving “to look at . . . activity as a *form* of the relation,” as a form (by no means the sole form!) of the relation BETWEEN?

As is well known (and this greatly helps to fill in the whole picture), it was precisely Elkonin who first called Vygotsky’s psychology “nonclassical.” And he saw it as nonclassical not because Vygotsky made activity an object of psychological analysis (this would have seemed more logical for the author of “activity-based periodization”), but because he discovered the interaction of ideal and real forms:

The primary forms of the affective-sense formations of the human consciousness exist objectively outside of each individual. They exist in human society in the shape of works of art. . . . That is, these forms exist prior to individual or subjective affective-sense formations.²⁵

By the way, this is simply in obvious contradiction to Leontiev’s view that, unlike significances, personal senses and the sensual fabric of consciousness do not have “supraindividual” or “nonpsychological” existence.

And the contradiction (more precisely, the fundamental divergence) here is deeper. It is not superfluous, apparently, to recall that according to Vygotsky consciousness is born of . . . consciousness itself! It was precisely for this, for reducing development to the interaction of consciousnesses (that is, to idealism!), for underestimating the role of activity in development that Vygotsky came under harsh criticism in the 1930s, not only from his opponents but also from his colleagues

(in particular, from Leontiev and from P.I. Zinchenko). But Elkonin credits Vygotsky for precisely what the supporters of activity theory criticized him.

Let us take the next step. Inserting Elkonin's periodization into a broader context, we see that for him, as for Vygotsky, activity is no more (but also no less) than *one of the forms* of a deeper *process of interaction of ideal and real forms*.²⁶ It is not the only form, let alone the only possible form. It is, moreover, a very special form that "works" during noncritical periods to ensure, so to say, the functional aspect of development, but does not determine development, for a form of relation cannot determine the relation itself.

Elkonin is very clear on this: "There are periods when the leading factor is transition, and there are periods when the leading factor is functional development."²⁷

I think that Vygotsky too understood this very well. While on the whole he recognized the role of activity in psychic development, he warned against the danger of this kind of reductionism: "Only the inner changes of development itself, only the breaks and turns in its course can provide a reliable basis for defining the chief stages in the construction of the child's personality."²⁸

But let us continue. When I said that I had a suspicion that Elkonin was teaching us to read, I was, of course, exaggerating somewhat. But it can be said without any exaggeration that in his subsequent works he seriously deepened his original understanding of what a "leading activity" is. I shall try to trace how this is represented in the works of Elkonin himself.

On the one hand, it seems that Elkonin's periodization is a kind of schema of a linear process of succession of leading activities, leading to the appearance of new psychological formations. On the other hand, there are some grounds for a different view.

The concept of leading activity needs to be supplemented somewhat. A leading activity is an activity within which the kinds of activity that follow it are differentiated. A leading activity is an activity that is central in the structure and system of activities—that is, their development proceeds under its influence and it enters into them.²⁹

Thus, we should speak not so much of a leading activity *as it is*, but of the system of activities within which alone the very concept

“leading activity” has sense. Leave the child with just one leading activity, depriving him somehow of all the others, and you can forget about the child’s development. What is more, transition from one leading activity to another is one of the aspects of transition from one system of activities to another—that is, an aspect of the development of this very system of activities. For

any period is a system of various kinds of activity, each of which performs its own function. It is necessary to look at the inner connection between individual activities and the transitions of one activity into another. We must specify the schema according to which new kinds of activity emerge and the change in their system.³⁰

This was written, let us note, in 1975—that is, four years after the article on periodization was published.

And again, from his later notes:

Now [Elkonin remarks in 1984], we hear cries that leading activity is nonsense and so forth. But the whole point is that the concept of leading activity is a concept concerning structure. And change in it is change in structure (in the structure of childhood). Nothing more. If development at each given moment has a certain structure, then that structure must contain leading components. These components depart and others come to take their place. This system lives. It is a living system!³¹

I think that what I have said is quite enough to show that the conception of the development of the psyche as a linear individual-chronological process of succession of leading activities is not just open to serious objections but in many respects does not correspond to the way in which both Vygotsky and Elkonin viewed this problem. The succession of leading activities is a quite real but rather superficial linear process *behind which is concealed* and in the form of which finds expression the constant structural reorganization of the entire system of the child’s activities as a living, organic system of interaction of ideal and real forms. It is this, incidentally, that ensures the continuity of development in both stable and critical periods.

Let us now examine another very important concept—the concept of “new psychological formation.” And again we see that from one point of view it can be interpreted in accordance with the logic of the linear-stages approach, but that when we consider the concept in a

broader context it becomes almost obvious that we are dealing with rather more complex matters.

What are the “new psychological formations” of an age? One still comes across the understanding of new psychological formations as some kind of new psychic processes and functions that emerge at definite age periods. But is this really so?

In the course of individual development, new qualities, properties, and features of personality, new psychic processes do, of course, appear, just as at a certain age appear, for instance, abstract thinking (although, unfortunately, not in all persons), volitional attention, and logical memory. But in Vygotsky and Elkonin the concept “new formation”—or, to be more precise, “new psychological formation”—meant something more. And here two problems seem of fundamental importance.

The first problem: what does the term itself mean? This is how Vygotsky defined the concept “new psychological formation”:

By age-related new formations we must understand that new type of structure of the personality and of its activity and those psychic and social changes that first arise at a given age level and that in the main determine the consciousness of the child.³²

The key words here are *type of structure of the personality*. Moreover, in developing this thesis, Vygotsky quite categorically states how in general we must understand development in ontogenesis:

At each given age period, development does not take place through change in individual aspects of the child’s personality, as a result of which the personality as a whole is restructured. In development just the opposite relationship exists: the child’s personality changes as a whole in its inner structure and the laws of change in this whole determine the motion of each of its parts.³³

Development is a process of restructuring of the personality and of consciousness as a whole (of reorganization of their structure), and not simply the emergence of new aspects and qualities of the personality, of separate psychic processes. This, properly speaking, is what Vygotsky defined as the *systemic structure of consciousness*. And Elkonin saw in this a research task: “All that Lev Semenovitch wrote about the systemic structure of consciousness

must be applied to the systemic structure of various kinds of activity.”³⁴

This naturally follows if a leading activity is none other than a leading component of the development (reorganization) of the entire system of the child’s activities—in this consists its, so to speak, “leadingness”—and if new formations are none other than a new type of structure of the personality and of consciousness—that is, again a result of the process of reorganization.

As we see, such a conception is very far removed from the naturalistic picture in the logic of linear dependence between leading activity and new psychological formations.

Here, apparently, it will be fitting to mention one strange circumstance connected with the text of this article of Elkonin’s. Comparing the text published in 1971 with the text of the same article published in the *Selected Psychological Works* [Izbrannye psikhologicheskie trudy] in 1989, already after the author’s death, we discover the following. Speaking of development in the 1971 article, Elkonin makes direct reference to Vygotsky and quotes his classical definition of development as the process of *transition from one age stage to another*, as the process of *reorganization of the structure of [the child’s] consciousness*. In all subsequent editions of the article this direct reference to Vygotsky is missing. Of course, I certainly do not think that this happened through anyone’s ill will. As a result of this editorial procedure, however, the connection between the ideas of Vygotsky and those of Elkonin was obscured, and this in fact makes it impossible adequately to understand the very essence of the approach to periodization. So in this case the proverb “What is written with a pen cannot be cut out with an axe” has proved wrong.³⁵

But there is another problem. The simplest logical analysis shows that the linear conception of the succession of leading activities and, as a consequence, of the emergence of new formations (i.e., of new properties of the personality) means by definition, and even presupposes, that new formations emerge only during *stable* periods of development—that is, when the child *has* a leading activity. Therefore the question *And do new psychological formations appear during critical periods?* seems absolutely senseless, because it can be answered only in the negative. But if, to repeat myself, we understand the relationship between leading activity and new formations as

nonlinear—that is, if we regard them as aspects of the single system “personality structure—system of activities as forms of relation”—then it becomes clear, for instance, that new formations appear during both critical and noncritical periods.

Elkonin asks: “What are the names for the new formations of crises? What are the names for the new formations of stable ages? What is the periodicity in the development of these new formations?”³⁶

This task—that is, the task of determining the psychological content of age-related crises and of stable ages—has, in my opinion, been accomplished brilliantly by K. Polivanova.³⁷ In her splendid book she cogently demonstrates that the content of crises is the transformation of an age-related new formation into a subjective capability—subjectivization. Moreover, age-related crises unfold in stages: from the child’s discovery of the ideal form of the next age level, through conflict between the desired and the possible, to the creation of a new social situation of development.

If, therefore, we really wish to pose the question of the relationships between the concepts “social situation of development,” “leading activity,” and “new age-related psychological formations,” if we are to make a serious attempt to understand the true essence of Elkonin’s celebrated schema of periodization, then for a start we must define what exactly these concepts mean, what kind of psychological reality lies behind them, and—most important of all—how they relate to other concepts of Vygotsky’s psychological theory.

Thus, behind the schema—simple enough at first glance—of succession of leading activities is hidden the very complex process of the development of activity and consciousness as an organic system. The externally linear process of transition from one leading activity to another conceals the profound process by means of which *a person acquires* at each stage of development a qualitatively new *space of possibilities*. Indeed, it is precisely this that I have done my best to show by laying bare the context of Elkonin’s ideas about periodization.

And not only I. V.P. Zinchenko speaks of the same thing, although in a somewhat different key:

The order of the succession, coexistence, and competition of activities constitutes an important psychological problem in connection with the development of the personality, which must rise above the space of the

kinds of activity accessible to it, select one or another of these activities, or construct a new activity.³⁸

And Boris Daniilovich Elkonin also speaks of the same thing in his last works, where the concept “space of possibilities” or “space of possible action” is central to the understanding of the *acts of development* of the child in the interaction of ideal and real forms.³⁹

I have devoted such close attention to Elkonin’s periodization of psychic development in order to demonstrate, by means of this example, the *fundamental possibility* of switching from one-sided linear approaches to the problem of development in psychology to systemic—and even, in a certain sense, spatial—models. Any serious analysis of the development of consciousness in ontogenesis leads, sooner or later but inevitably, to theoretical models of this kind.

You can argue as long as you like about the choice of a criterion for demarcating stages of age-related psychic development (leading activity being one possible criterion). But if you try to see the forest for the trees, then it becomes clear that consciousness itself is an organic—that is, nonlinear by definition—system and that the development of this system is a process of uninterrupted functional and structural reorganization. Consciousness is, by its very nature, an organism—namely, a spiritual organism—and a psychology that aims to construct a contemporary theory of consciousness must not follow the traditional logic of empiricism, but proceed from the logic of the development of organic systems. In other words, it must become an organic, and at the same time a genetic, psychology, one that recreates in its own abstract-theoretical constructions the living logic of the establishment of real-concrete forms of consciousness as an organic system and simultaneously as an organ of individuality. And here, on this path, the activity approach in psychology demonstrates both its potential, still far from exhausted, and its limits.

Notes

1. G.P. Shchedrovitskii, *Izbrannye trudy* (Moscow, 1995), p. 297.
2. E.G. Iudin, *Sistemnyi podkhod i printsip deiatel'nosti* (Moscow, 1987), pp. 298–99.
3. See, for example, *Deiatel'nost': teorii, metodologiya, problemy* (Moscow,

1990), and also *Activity: The Theory, Methodology and Problems* (Moscow, 1990).

4. D.B. El'konin [Elkonin], "K probleme periodizatsii psikhicheskogo razvitiia v detskom vozraste," *Voprosy psikhologii*, 1971, no. 4, pp. 6–21. An English version is available at www.marxists.org/archive/elkonin/works/1971/stages.htm.

5. El'konin, "K probleme," p. 14.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

8. D.I. Fel'dshtein [Feldstein], *Psikhologiya vzrosleniia. Strukturno-soderzhatelnye kharakteristiki protsessa razvitiia lichnosti* (Moscow: Flinta, 1999), p. 109.

9. V.P. Zinchenko, *Psikhologicheskie osnovy pedagogiki* (Moscow, 2002), p. 414.

10. F.T. Mikhailov, *Samoopredelenie kul'tury* (Moscow: Indrik, 2003).

11. *Ibid.*, especially ch. 3, "Kak vozmozhna fundamental'naia nauka," pp. 67–82.

12. See D.W. Winnicott, *Holding and Interpretation* (London: Hogarth Press, 1986).

13. El'konin, "K probleme," p. 21.

14. A.N. Leont'ev [Leontiev], *Izbrannye psikhologicheskie proizvedeniia*, vol. 1 (Moscow, 1983), p. 285.

15. *Ibid.*, pp. 285–86.

16. But, after all, Leontiev states clearly that a leading activity is an activity *the development of which* conditions the most important changes in psychic processes.

17. What makes classical texts classical is that their content (like that of works of art) can never be interpreted definitively. There is always something more in them than what lies on the surface.

18. D.B. El'konin [Elkonin], *Izbrannye psikhologicheskie trudy* (Moscow: Pedagogika, 1989), p. 484.

19. A curious detail. In the last edition of the *Diaries* [Dnevnik] an unfortunate error has crept in at this point. Instead of "not as [ne kak] object-oriented activity" there appears in the printed text "but as [no kak] object-oriented activity" (D.B. El'konin, *Psikhicheskoe razvitiie v detskikh vozrastakh* [Moscow–Voronezh, 1995], p. 363).

20. L.S. Vygotskii [Vygotsky], *Sobranie sochinenii* (Moscow, 1984), vol. 4, pp. 258–59.

21. V.V. Davydov, *Poslednie vystupleniia* (Riga, 1998), p. 32. Let us recall that this was a fundamental and unchanging position for Davydov. As early as 1986 he wrote that the concept "leading activity" serves "as a direct concretization of the concept of the social situation of the child's development at one or another age" (V.V. Davydov, *Problemy razvivaiushchego obucheniia* [Moscow, 1986], p. 58).

22. El'konin, *Izbrannye*, p. 42.

23. For a more detailed discussion see N. Veresov and P. Hakkarainen, "O predposylkakh stanovleniia uchebnoi deiatel'nosti u starshikh doshkol'nikov," *Vestnik Mezhdunarodnoi Assotsiatsii Razvivaiushchego Obucheniia*, 2000, no. 8, pp. 44–62; and also N. Veresov and P. Hakkarainen, "Stanovlenie kollektivnoi deiatel'nosti u starshikh doshkol'nikov," *Voprosy psikhologii*, 2001, no. 1, pp. 43–59.

24. L.S. Vygotskii, *Osnovy pedagogii. Stenogrammy lektsii* (1934), pp. 112–13.

25. El'konin, *Izbrannye*, pp. 477–78.

26. The tautology in "form of interaction . . . of forms" is obvious, but I simply cannot put it otherwise.

27. El'konin, *Izbrannye*, p. 495.
28. Vygotskii, *Sobranie*, vol. 4, p. 247.
29. El'konin, *Izbrannye*, p. 510.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 509.
31. El'konin, *Psikhicheskoe*, p. 16.
32. Vygotskii, *Sobranie*, vol. 4, p. 248.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 256.
34. El'konin, *Izbrannye*, p. 509.
35. In making a new English translation of this article of Elkonin, we used the Russian text of 1971, so our Western colleagues have obtained access to the complete authentic text.
36. El'konin, *Izbrannye*, p. 498.
37. K.N. Polivanova, *Psikhologiiia vozrastnykh krizisov* (Moscow, 2000).
38. V.P. Zinchenko, *Psikhologicheskie osnovy pedagogiki* (Moscow, 2002), p. 415.
39. B.D. El'konin [Elkonin], *Psikhologiiia razvitiia* (Moscow: Akademiia, 2001).

Copyright of Journal of Russian & East European Psychology is the property of M.E. Sharpe Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.