

Commentary: Understanding and using *perezhivanie* and *subjectivity*

Nelson Mok

Monash University, Australia

The task of understanding what Vygotsky means by *perezhivanie* is an exegetical one, hindered not only by differences in language and culture, but also by more concrete issues of incomplete and/or inaccurate translations of his works. However, the extent to which the use of the *perezhivanie* concept relies on this exegesis ultimately depends on whether a given researcher finds enough value in the concept as ostensibly defined in “The problem of the environment” (Vygotsky, 1994) for addressing some theoretical or methodological concern, or whether they seek a more complete conceptualisation based within the cultural-historical theoretical system as a whole (whatever this is interpreted to be). In either case, and as exemplified in the contributions to this special issue, researchers have drawn links to different ideas both within Vygotsky’s work and beyond it in other theoretical systems, giving rise to a varied palette of interpretations from which subsequent researchers can draw for various domains and purposes.

To conclude this special issue, I will outline and contextualise some of the salient considerations and challenges relating to use of the *perezhivanie* concept. Overall, the underlying issue in understanding the concept is establishing the system within which the meaning of the concept is defined since, like the sign in the semiotics, this meaning is one determined by its *relation* with other signs (here, concepts), and indeed, by the specific research context for which it is used. For the purpose of structuring this discussion, I separate issues primarily of theory, to those primarily of method and use of the concept. In the latter section, I also outline some further considerations relating to the empirical studies of childhood learning presented in this issue and argue for the use of *perezhivanie* metamethodologically to understand the process of research itself, as a starting point for addressing emerging issues.

Theoretical considerations

With the growing interest in the *perezhivanie* concept over the past decade from scholars in different fields, a number of different conversations have emerged, leading to a situation in which *perezhivanie* “is represented as a splattering of ideas that scholars have drawn upon in different ways to make sense of complex data” (Fleer, p. 109, this volume). Thus, it may be helpful to sketch out two of the potentially overlapping conversations and approaches that have emerged over the years, so that the different areas of concern can be untangled.

1. Building on Vygotsky, building from Vygotsky

First, there are two kinds of approaches to understanding and completing the concept, relative to Vygotsky. In the first group of approaches, Vygotsky is understood as having begun, but not yet been able to adequately describe, a new approach to psychology to supersede his earlier work. Thus, Vygotsky’s work on *perezhivanie*, the social situation of development, and his writing in

“Thinking and Speech” (Vygotsky, 1987), are seen as representing the beginnings of a new approach to human development, with theorists aiming to build on and complete this work. For González Rey, for example, this set of concepts, especially that of sense from “Thinking and speech”, is seen as the beginning of a new approach to understanding human development, at the centre of which is a new conceptualisation of human subjectivity (see, González Rey, 2009; González Rey & Mitjans Martínez, this volume). From this emerges a new methodological apparatus to support the study of subjectivity: Qualitative Epistemology (see, e.g., Bezerra & Costa; Campolina & Mitjans Martínez; Madeira Coelho; and Patiño & Goulart, this volume).

Theorists have also looked for similarities and differences to conceptual systems beyond Vygotsky to understand the *perezhivanie* concept and seek mutual theoretical enrichment. For example, links have been drawn to Dewey’s conceptualisation of *experience* (e.g., Blunden, 2009; Clará, 2013; Glassman, 2001; Roth & Jornet, 2014), Gibson’s *affordances* (e.g., Daniels, 2010; Michell, 2012; van Lier, 2008), and Stanislavsky’s system of theatre (e.g., Smagorinsky, 2011). In this volume, *perezhivanie* is extended through the related concepts of metaxis (see, Davis & Dolan), and *soperezhivanie* (see, March & Fleer).

In a second group of approaches, *perezhivanie* is understood as having a basis in Vygotsky’s earlier works, especially *The Psychology of Art* (Vygotsky, 1971), with fragments of the concept existing in different stages of development throughout his other writings (see, e.g., Michell, this volume). Thus, through deep textological analysis, it is assumed that the *perezhivanie* concept can be deciphered and subsequently fully developed. Vygotsky’s descriptions of *perezhivanie* in “The problem of the environment” (Vygotsky, 1994) and “The crisis at age seven” (Vygotsky, 1998) are therefore seen as explications of ideas that had only been alluded to throughout his academic career. Consequently, Vygotsky’s last works are seen not as the beginnings of a completely new theoretical system per se, but a different part of the system he had developed during his instrumental period. In this approach, efforts are directed at consolidating Vygotsky’s theoretical system, linking *perezhivanie* with other concepts like the social situation of development (Bozhovich, 2009; Veresov, in press) and word-meaning and sense (Mahn & John-Steiner, 2000, 2008; Robbins, 2001).

2+3. Perezhivanie as phenomenon, conceptual tool, and/or rhetorical definition as intellect or affect

A second, more philosophical discussion has also arisen from the work of Veresov (2004, in press), who distinguishes between two meanings of *perezhivanie* found in Vygotsky’s writings on the topic. The first relates to its phenomenal status—*perezhivanie* as an experienced phenomenon, an object of study, whether understood as a process or a particular kind of experiential content. The second relates to its epistemic value—*perezhivanie* as a tool for making sense of data and for conceptualising and understanding the role of lived experience in the process of development by making that experience visible in analysis. Veresov’s approach builds *from* Vygotsky to discuss both facets of *perezhivanie*, but does so more holistically. Rather than simply drawing links between *perezhivanie* and other mutually informing concepts, links are also drawn to cultural-historical theory’s explanatory principles (e.g., the genetic¹ law of cultural development) and the approach to methodology (e.g., units of analysis) that arose in Vygotsky’s later works.

By situating the *perezhivanie* concept within the broader context of cultural-historical theory rather than the more specific contexts of concrete research, a third understanding of the concept can be

discerned: *perezživanie* as a rhetorical definition. Although a relatively broader theoretical definition of *perezživanie* is given in “The problem of the environment” (Vygotsky, 1994), theorists using or analysing the concept have often focused on the ostensible definitions given in particular concrete examples through the text. Thus, for example, Bozhovich (2009) takes Vygotsky’s example of the child being teased—who, unable to *generalise* the experienced emotions, is therefore not able to comprehend and be affected by the teasing—as indicating a primarily (and untenably) intellectual conceptualisation of *perezživanie*. Elsewhere, Vygotsky also discusses examples in which the salient determining factor of *perezživanie* is a particular attitude or emotion. The extent to which these narrow definitions are useful for researchers in similar research contexts—even if not using the cultural-historical theory framework—is a matter for further debate. However, the apparent existence of varying definitions echoes an issue that has earlier been raised regarding the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Namely, that narrow definitions were used by Vygotsky in a *rhetorical* manner.

As Valsiner and van der Veer (1993) write, regarding the ZPD:

If we consider Vygotsky's use of the [ZPD] concept as a rhetoric mediating device for his disputes with his contemporaries, it may become easier to understand why the use of this concept occurs in different contexts, and why there was never a clear effort to clarify the term in theoretical ways. (p. 43)

Veresov (2004) has similarly argued that the definition of the ZPD used by theorists is often the one applied to the particular context of school education, narrowed from a broader context that would otherwise include contexts such as informal education and play. Such a narrow definition makes theoretical development elusive, as focus shifts to those particular contexts rather than on the deeper mechanisms by which the ZPD operates. Interpretations of *perezživanie* as being primarily concerned with emotion (see, Michell, this volume) thus need to be tempered with an understanding of the possibility that Vygotsky’s apparent emphasis on emotion may in fact be due to: 1) the process of analysis, in which emotions/affect/attitudes are revealed to be salient in those cases, or 2) a rhetorical means by which Vygotsky directs attention to a previous neglected area of research. That is, while emotion may constitute a part of Vygotsky’s rhetorical efforts, such definitions may not in fact be representative of the concept *per se*. This, of course, leads to the third and final emergent discussion, of whether *perezživanie* proper does in fact refer primarily, and pre-analytically, to emotion (as in work following Mahn and John-Steiner, 2000, 2008), intellectual processes (as in Bozhovich, 2009, or to an extent, Michell, this volume), or whether the aspect of consciousness that characterises particular *perezživanie* is only determinable following analysis (see, Mok, 2015). The next section examines issues that emerge when *perezživanie* is used in research.

Methodological considerations

Central to cultural-historical theory is the general genetic law of cultural development, according to which social and cultural interactions are not only a context within which psychological development occurs, but are also the very source of those developments (Vygotsky, 1997b). The concept of *perezživanie* allows for a deeper interrogation of these social and cultural interactions—to the extent that they are relevant to an individual’s development—and, as evidenced in this issue, allows for a theorisation of aspects of interaction and development previously hidden from view: emotion and subjectivity. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical theory became known to the West, through selected translated publications, at a time when there was growing dissatisfaction with cognitivism and positivist epistemology. The subsequent theorisations of emotion and subjectivity that

necessarily formed a part of a response to these theoretical frameworks were constituted not in cognitivist, but rather cultural and developmental, terms. Thus, they are understood participate in the process of development not through mediating or constituting products of cognition, but instead through configuring the relationship between an individual and their concrete environment. Consequently, the concepts of *perezhivanie* and subjectivity constitute new interpretive lenses for analysing data generated with well-known qualitative, subject-centered methods such as verbal reporting, narrative analysis, and introspective interviews, alongside observational data. This brings us to some final considerations regarding these methods in the contexts of their justification in cultural-historical theory, and their use in childhood education research.

Verbal reports and narrative research

A straightforward means to gain insight into an individual's experiences and experience of their surrounding environment is through the use of verbal report data—whether spoken or written—collected through requests, interviews, and informal discussion. Due to the limited ability for children to express their thoughts and experiences through speech, researchers using these methods in this issue have instead examined the *perezhivanie* of the adults that create and constitute the developmental environment in which children are situated—for example, teachers (e.g., Davis & Dolan), family (e.g., Babaeff, and March & Fler), and other adult figures (e.g., Fler, Adams, Hao, & Gunstone). However, questions have been raised as to the validity of these kinds of reports as used in other domains. As Polkinghorne (2007) argues, there are two kinds of threats to the validity of research based on elicited narratives: the first arises from a disjunction between a subject's actual experience of meaning and their verbal expression of this experience, and the second is the gap between this expression and the researcher's interpretation. I briefly discuss these two areas in turn.

In the first case,

validity threats arise in narrative research because the languaged descriptions given by participants of their experienced meaning is not a mirrored reflection of this meaning. Participants' stories may leave out or obscure aspects of the meaning of experiences they are telling about. The validity issue about the evidence of assembled texts is about how well they are understood to express the actual meaning experienced by the participants (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 480).

There are four sources for the disjunction between experienced meaning and its verbal expression (see also, Bitbol & Petitmengin, 2013, for a discussion on the reliability and validity of introspection data more generally). First, a research participant is only able to, at most, express "that portion of meaning that they can access through reflection" (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 481). Thus, there is a gap between actual experience and the aspects of that experience of which the subject is cognitively aware. This is compounded secondly, by the limits of both language itself and the ability of a research participant in expressing the complexity and depth of lived experience. As Vygotsky writes, "*the thought is a cloud from which speech is shed in drops*" (emphasis in original, Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 134),

the transition from thought to speech is an extremely complex process which involves the partitioning of the thought and its recreation in words. This is why thought does not correspond with the word ... there is always a background thought, a hidden subtext in our speech. The direct transition from thought to word is impossible.... Meaning mediates

thought in its path to verbal expression. The path from thought to word is indirect and internally mediated. (Vygotsky, 1987, pp. 281-282)

Third, participants may be unwilling to fully express their true feelings and understandings so as to project a more positive self-image to the researcher, especially if the researcher is a stranger or where rapport and trust has not been adequately established. Finally, the texts produced by the participant are not simply productions, but rather (co-)constructions mediated, whether knowingly or otherwise, by interactions with (e.g., knowledge of the purpose of the interview, formality of the interview), and cues (e.g., body language, intonation in responses) from, the interviewer/researcher (Polkinghorne, 2007).

To address these issues, the notion of *perezživanie* can be used not only to conceptualise a participant's lived experience, but also to conceptualise their experience of providing accounts of those experiences to the researcher. That is, eliciting a narrative report of experiences from a participant does not remove them from their environment to provide the opportunity to reflect on experiences "from the outside", as it were, but rather, the elicitations of an interviewer form part of that individual's continuing lived experience. Consequently, a second potentially fruitful layer of analysis emerges. First, there is what the participant describes as being their experience. Second, by understanding how the participant has described their experience—for example, what is omitted, what appears to be important/salient to that individual, the specific words and concepts used, and so on—the researcher has the potential for greater insight into the personal characteristics of that individual to supplement their analysis. These two layers correspond roughly to what Pavlenko (2007) has described as a given narrative's subject reality (the content of what is said) and text reality (how participants construct themselves in the narrative), respectively.

Observational data, and the process of interpretation

Applicable to both narrative/verbal report data and observational data is a second kind of disjuncture: the gap that exists between the data and a researcher's interpretation. While this issue is not unique to cultural-historical research, it carries greater significance in research guided by the concept of *perezživanie*, in which researchers seek to infer and understand an individual's cognitive and affective activity—for example their reasoning, understanding, the emotional dimensions of their experience, attitudes, and so on—from observed behaviour and/or elicited narratives. This inference requires a researcher to interpret the data to create knowledge, but this knowledge needs to be validated if a reader is to accept the claims made. Beyond supporting claims through providing a retraceable logic from data to the claim (see also, Denzin, 2010, for a discussion on issues around the use of mixed methods for "triangulation"), researchers can benefit from being aware of which epistemological stance they take.

Schwandt (2000) identifies three epistemological stances in qualitative inquiry: interpretivism, hermeneutics, and social constructionism. Of particular interest here are the former two. From the interpretivists perspective, the meanings that an individual attributes to their actions, experiences, and words are inherent to those actions, experiences, and words, and in principle understandable in the same way by the researcher. That is, the subjective consciousness of the individual can, in a sense, be grasped by the researcher from the outside through appropriate analysis. Though there a number of methods for achieving this understanding, it is perhaps worth mentioning that this idea appears in Vygotsky's work, in which he states "real understanding [of speech] lies in the penetration into the motives of the interlocutor" (p. 136). By contrast, from the perspective of

philosophical hermeneutics, an interpretation of data is understood as a product of a dialogue between the data and the researcher's own prejudices and perceptions—in short, “textual interpretations are always perspectival” (Polkinghorne, 2007, p. 483). This idea is not only echoed in González Rey's Qualitative Epistemology (see, González Rey & Mitjans Martínez, and Patiño & Goulart, this volume), in which the knowledge developed in research is a constructive-interpretive process, but also by the very concept of *perezhivanie* itself, when applied to the researcher: different researchers can, due to differences in their personal characteristics, view the same data in very different ways.

To make evident the validity of interpretation, we can again use the concept of *perezhivanie* in a metamethodological way. If a reader is to understand the logical steps taken to draw a particular conclusion or inference from the data, it is necessary to make the researcher's own *perezhivanie* evident in the final report. Not only their understanding and approach to research at the epistemological level, but also, if an interpretivists perspective is taken, the means by which an understanding of the participant's subjective meaning is achieved. Conversely, if the hermeneutical position is taken, the various aspects of the researcher's personality, cognition, knowledge (including language and culture shared with the research subject), and affect that have shaped their interpretation of the data will need to be made clear.

To conclude

In this concluding special issue, I have attempted to make explicit, for researchers seeking to use the concepts of *perezhivanie* or *subjectivity* in their research, some of the kinds of theoretical conversations and approaches that have recently emerged, as well as methodological issues of validity that have arisen in this issue. In the latter case, I have provided a starting point for the metamethodological use of cultural-historical theory and specifically, *perezhivanie*, to understand the process of research and knowledge construction itself. Cultural-historical theory provides a set of tools to conceptualise and understand psychological functioning and development, however, as researchers that exist in the same world occupied by those we observe, those tools can be turned inwards to ourselves. For although it is possible to study the *perezhivaniya* of others, we too, have our own *perezhivaniya* as we perform and construct our research. Making clear this *perezhivaniya* so that readers understand the meaning we ourselves have made of the concept as we use it in research is a way to ensure that our research is sound.

¹ Note that “genetic” here is used in the sense of *genesis* rather than relating to biological *genes*.

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Author

Nelson Mok is a PhD candidate in the Faculty of Education, Monash University (Peninsula), Australia. With a background in applied linguistics, his thesis examines the potential of

autoethnographic methodology, informed by the concept of *perezhivanie*, for studying self-directed second language acquisition.

Correspondence: nelson.mok@monash.edu