

Fedor Vasilyuk's Psychology of Life-projects

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In 1984, Fyodor Vasilyuk published a seminal book on psychotherapy: "The Psychology of Experiencing" (1988) – according to Alex Kozulin (1991) "the first important contribution to the field of psychodynamic theory made by a Soviet author in the last 50 years." The aim of Vasilyuk's book was to provide a foundation for psychotherapists to assist patients dealing with life-crises.

The key concepts of the work are переживание (*perezhivanie*), translated somewhat inadequately as "experiencing" and understood by Vasilyuk as an active process of "working over" and overcoming a crisis which has arisen in what he calls an "отношение" (*otnosheniye*), translated as "life relation." These life-relations collectively make up what Vasilyuk calls the subject's жизненный мир (*zhiznnyi mir*), literally "life world."

Crisis situations arise in a person's life from failures in these life-relations, or conflicts between them. He says:

During the period of acute pain [such as following the death of a loved one, or failure to win a desired career move] *perezhivanie* becomes the person's leading activity ... which occupies a dominating position in the life of a person and through which his personal development is carried out. (Vasilyuk, 1988, p. 231)

In his review of Vasilyuk's book, Alex Kozulin (1991) interpreted this as follows:

The individual must bring about the unity of the self, and not only as an internal conscious project, but as an actual existence in a difficult world. The ... the unity of the self first appears as life-intent or life-project. This intent as related to the system of values is felt by a person as a 'calling', and in its relation to the spatio-temporal actuality of existence it becomes 'life work'.

Otnosheniye (отношение)

Otnosheniye is the same concept which is found in Leontyev's description of the structure of personality, which is translated as life-relation, but I agree somewhat with Alex Kozulin's view just quoted. 'Life-relation' has the advantage that as a relation it is neither internal nor external but both. And yet it fails to convey what it is which is related internally and externally and fails to convey the drama with which it is to be associated. For Leontyev and Vasilyuk, the specific life relation at issue is a subject's commitment to a life-project.

As an action is defined as a behaviour with a motive which differs from its goal and it is both subjective and objective; otherwise it is not an action. So there is a sense then in which every composite of actions is also necessarily both subjective and objective.

Activities are both subjective and objective, but an activity gains its objective unity from the objectively synthetic tendency of the composite actions, each of which is carried out by a different person and may have subjectively divergent intent. Activities are units of social formations and these formations exist independently of the consciousness of any of the participants.

The subjective unity of an activity derived from the unifying symbols and sensuous experiences which represents the activity to an individual subject. A subject's commitments form a structure, which, in Leontyev and Vasilyuk's terms, constitutes the subject's personality. But these two structures, – that of the commitments of a subject and that of the projects of a social formation – are not correlates of one another, but the units of each are correlates. The subject's external world is a mere part of the external world in itself, subjectively compiled by the subject's commitments.

The unity of the subject's external and internal world is the subject's 'life world'. Units of this life world are *otnoshiniya*. *Otnoshiniya* are both objective and subjective, but to properly convey what is entailed in an *otnoshiniya* we must use different words to denote their internal or mental aspects and their external, worldly aspects.

Otnoshiniye expresses both a subject's 'commitment [to a project]' and the 'project' itself, as something that exists independently of the subject. In the case of that project which emerges to express the subject's "life-intent," the words "vocation" and "life-project" are appropriate. It is this life-intent or life-project which integrates the subject's personality and is the leading activity in the subject's personal development. This life-intent is built, generally over many years, with the development of the subject's will as the leading function of the creative formation of their personality.

The meaning of *otnoshiniye* is further clarified when Vasilyuk explains that the absence of resistant forces makes action meaningless, so an activity, and therefore an *otnoshiniye*, can exist only so long as resistance must be overcome. Imaginary commitments which in principle never see the light of the external world don't count and nor does pursuit of readily available desires. As Vygotsky (1928) wrote in the context of the development of character in disabled children: "The existence of obstacles creates a 'goal' for mental acts, that is, it introduces into development a future-directed mentality" (CW, v. 2, p. 158), and "compensation is a battle, and every battle can result in two completely opposite outcomes: victory or defeat" (p. 159).

The Life world (жизненный мир)

The life world is not merely an aggregate of a person's commitments, but is inclusive of the objective reality of these life-projects; so it is both subjective and objective in the same sense that an action is both subjective and objective, though we lack a word to adequately express it. Nor is the life world simply an additive sum of these projects and commitments, but a structure which includes the interconnections between the *otnoshiniya* both in theory and in reality, in addition to hierarchical relations between them in the subject's life-work. The kind of interconnections and structures which are applicable to the internal world of the subject's commitments differ from those application to the material world in which projects are played out. So different characterisations must be made of the internal and the external aspects of the life world.

Vasilyuk's theory is based on a 4-part typology of life worlds:

This typology is structured as follows: the object of analysis is the 'life world'. This has external and internal aspects, denoted ... as 'external world' and 'internal world'. The external world can be

either easy or difficult. The internal world can be either simple or complex. The intersections of these categories give us four possible states, or types of life world. (p. 92)

The life world is meant to be considered in the context of a specific crisis arising in a specific commitment, not necessarily the subject's life-intent, and is not necessarily descriptive of a person's entire life and personality. Only the commitments and projects relevant to a specific life-crisis figure in the characterisation of the life world.

The ease or difficulty of the external world describes the status of projects to which the subject is committed, that is, whether or not the subject is able to make progress towards their goal. An easy world is one in which no effort at all is required to attain the goal; a difficult world is one in which attainment of the goal has become impossible. Both are critical conditions; normal life takes place between these two extremes.

The simplicity or complexity of the internal world describes the interconnections between a subject's commitments, their relative value or theoretical incompatibility, irrespective of their fate in the external world.

Each of the four types of crisis are characterised by a single word: stress, frustration, conflict and crisis.

Stress is the crisis of the *easy-simple life world*. Here the subject has no goals and pursues no project because they demand and receive immediate gratification. Having no direction in which to strive they express diffuse anxiety which is manifested as stress. A person may have many commitments, but so long as the subject pursues each commitment only one at a time and encounters no resistance, the subject's world is simple and easy. Vasilyuk call this a hedonistic crisis and it is widespread in modern, prosperous, democratic states.

Frustration is the crisis of the *difficult-simple life world*. The subject is focused on their life-defining project, but achievement of their goal is blocked and nothing can be done about it. The typical example of this crisis is a disaster in a treasured career which has hitherto defined a subject's life, and the subject may find themselves unable to go on in a life which has become pointless.

Conflict is the crisis of the *easy-complex life world*. The subject is committed to more than one project, both of which are immediately attainable, but the two options have nothing in common by means of which to compare them, except that the subject has a commitment to both of them and must choose which to pursue: should I have a child or continue my career?

The crisis of the *difficult-complex life world* is a *life-crisis*, combining features of the other three sectors. The subject's chosen life-project is blocked and there is a temptation to abandon former commitments for other projects, and only a creative response offers the possibility of recovering a meaningful life.

On the basis of these four types of crisis, Vasilyuk defines a typology of four kinds of perezhivanie, respectively hedonistic perezhivanie, realistic perezhivanie, value perezhivanie and creative perezhivanie. The four types of perezhivanie are not restricted to the critical situation which constitutes the archetypal crisis in its eyes.

Perezhivanie (переживание)

Vasilyuk clearly states that he is not using the term “*perezhivanie*”

“in the sense most familiar in psychological literature — that of a direct, usually emotional form in which the content of his consciousness is given to the subject — but to denote *a special inner activity or inner work* by means of which an individual succeeds in withstanding various (usually painful) events and situations in life, succeeds in regaining the mental equilibrium which has been temporarily lost — succeeds, in short, in coping with a crisis. (p. 15)

Interestingly, while acknowledging himself as a student of A N Leontyev’s activity theory, he says that “there is no appropriate category or term available within this body of work.” (p. 15)

Perezhivanie is an *activity*, a particular type of work which produces “mental equilibrium, comprehension, tranquillity, a new sense of values, etc. ... reconstructing a psychological world and directed towards the establishment of correlation between consciousness and existence in terms of meaning, the overall aim of the world of experiencing being to give greater meaningfulness to life” (p. 16, 31)

Like any other activity, the capacity for it develops from rudimentary to maturity as the subject grows from infancy to adulthood, and utilises all the psychological functions and all the culturally available resources.

Types of *Perezhivanie*

The prototype of the *easy-simple* life world is the *infant*. *Perezhivanie* is impossible in the purely easy-simple life world, because everything is provided and the pleasure principle faces no resistance. With immediate satisfaction there can be no contradiction or any situation creating psychological challenges to be ‘worked over’. However, as soon as some difficulty arises in this infantile life-world, the only psychological resources available are those already acquired in the easy-simple world of hedonistic, here-and-now satisfaction. Whatever the nature of the difficulty or complication which has arisen the infantile response will be manifested in diffuse, senseless *activity*. *Perezhivanie* entails a denial of reality, a delusion that the need has in fact been met or that it was never felt.

The prototype of the *difficult-simple* life world is the *fanatic*. The *perezhivanie* of the difficult-simple life world is Realism, but *perezhivanie* in this world begins with *patience*; patience differs from denial in that although it believes in a good which is not present, it does not deny the problem and believes it can be solved. But when patience runs out, and frustration sets in and it is faced with the impossible situation, the reality principle offers two alternative ways out. The first way is to postpone satisfaction, or lower one’s sights and make do with a substitute for what is impossible according to the reality principle. In the second way, the subject abandons the former pursuit (the meaning of their former life) and takes up another which is in no way a substitute for the loss of the first or a continuation of it by other means. This may be what is called ‘coping behaviour’.

The *easy-complex life world* is an aesthetic and moral world. The *perezhivanie* of the *easy-complex world* is *value-perezhivanie*. The critical situation may arise when an activity which is attractive to the subject comes into conflict with the subject's life-project; either the offending activity is morally discredited and postponed or abandoned or the subject finds a way of mentally reconciling it as not really in contradiction to the life-project. Alternatively, value-perezhivanie is required in the wake of a wrecked life-project, searching amongst other projects for that which is most valued and could restore meaning to their life, such as 'in memory of' the lost life-project. Alternatively, the crisis may be resolved by a radical restructuring of the subject's entire value system, maintaining continuity through forgiveness and redemption. The principle of value-experiencing is *phronesis* or wisdom, rather than intelligence, but it is theoretical not practical work.

The *perezhivanie* of the *difficult-complex life world* is *creative perezhivanie* and entails an entire reconstruction of the self.

The first alternative is to continue the pursuit of the *values* which had hitherto defined one's life but were identified with a particular person or project which is no longer available; however, the identification of the life-intent with this particular form of realising it can be overcome by reformulating these values in more general, abstract terms, so that they can be realised in some other particular form (or person), and the fixation on that former particular embodiment was unnecessary.

The second path is to discover that life has hitherto been based on false values and to formulate a new value system, but in such a way that preserves the meaning of the past life, showing how it has conquered error and at last won through to life's true intent.

The third type of creative *perezhivanie* is connected with the highest stages of personality development as the life-intent moves away from egoistic projects and places the self in the service of higher motives, proof against any misfortune and for which, ultimately the person is prepared for any sacrifice including life itself.

The leading psychological formation in this life world is the *will*. The integrity of the person as presented in self-consciousness is not something present and achieved, but has to be *actualised* in life-activity and the will is the only organ which can achieve that actualisation. The will is therefore the central psychological formation in the formation of the personality. The will is first developed in childhood, according to Vygotsky, in the passage through the series of childhood life-crises which separate the successive phases of childhood, when the social situation of development which defines the social position of the child must be transformed for child to 'grow up' and the child break through to the next station in life. Likewise in adulthood, the personality develops precisely through the person's passage through life-crises by means of creative *perezhivaniya*, which reconstruct the self while not discarding the former self, but allowing the past to be rationally understood from a new, higher standpoint.

Social theory

Vasilyuk is exclusively focused on psychotherapy and there is no element of social theory in his work, other than the use of *otnosheniye* as a unit of a

subject's life world, both in its internal and its external aspect. He provides a concrete basis for understanding how individuals relate to the wider world specifically through their participation in and commitment to collaborative projects. Vasilyuk's focus is on how new, generally more profound, commitments are made in the passage through crises that arise when projects fail or reach an impasse or when they come into conflict with other valued projects.

Social theorists would also be interested in how young people first begin to participate in projects and form their first commitments.

Some young people enter adulthood directly, so to speak, already committed to a struggle for personal survival and the hope of raising a family who will do better. Once crises arising in this simple-difficult life world have exhausted the subject's patience, then realistic *perezhivanie* works over the situation, and the subject can develop from fanaticism to the creative search for other means.

But in general, children do not enter adulthood with strong commitments to difficult projects. Vasilyuk tells us that when this simple-easy world is disrupted the reaction is stress generally manifested in meaningless activity. "Any failure or situational mishap is likely to be perceived as a general life-crisis." (p. 148)

So in fact, Vasilyuk's ideas are applicable in the case of young people, once their carefree life has been disrupted by some life-changing experience. For these experiences we must turn to other writers, however.

References

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