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Unity of Affect and Intellect in Socio-Dramatic Play

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The article presents the interpretation of the unity of affect and intellect (L.S. Vygotsky) as exemplified in a socio-dramatic play. Emotions (e.g. unwillingness to submit to the rule), and understanding of the reasons for the rules by a child are studied separately from each other, since their interconnection is implied, but not experimentally proven. This paper makes an attempt to “catch” the unity of affect and intellect as part of developmental psychology based on the idea of the connection of the semantic and technical aspect of the action (D.B. Elkonin et al.), of the intelligent emotions (A.V. Zaporozhets) and the act of development (B.D. Elkonin). It describes a qualitative shift in socio-dramatic play related to the cultural shaping of emotions; it shows the child’s feeling of its action in the play. It shows how the child’s steps in the playing space aimed at achieving the culmination of the story are related to the unity of affect and intellect.

Keywords: socio-dramatic play, cultural-historical psychology.

L.S. Vygotsky wrote about the need for a holistic understanding of the human psyche with a view to the unity of affect and intellect. The possibility of such a vision was implemented in the “Psychology of Art” [2], which shows a mechanism of catharsis as the successful “correction” of natural emotions after their cultural shaping. He also warned of the danger of one-sided understanding of the games of preschool children [3]. According to Vygotsky, children need to play to fulfill their unrealizable desires, while the criterion that differentiates the pretend play from other children’s activities is an imaginary case (the difference between the visible and meaningful – when a stick is used as a horse), but such understanding of the play is associated with risks.

Firstly, there comes a danger of an intellectualistic approach to the play; “...if the play is understood as symbolism, it turns into some kind of activity, like algebra in action; it turns into a system of some characters generalizing reality; here we do not find anything specific to the

play and imagine the child as a luckless algebraist, who cannot even write signs on paper, but shows them in action” [3, p. 204].

Secondly, the play may be presented as a cognitive process, and the affective moment remains unnoticed, as well as *what* a child actually does in the play, how and why he builds a play using certain mode of action¹.

Thirdly, there will be a need anyway to identify and specify *what* the child develops being in imaginary situation (Vygotsky pointed out the new shape of his desires, as well as the release of his behaviour from situational connectedness).

Lev Semenovich did not have enough time to build a detailed picture as to the development of the role playing, which would make it clear how it “properly” links the affect and the intellect. The idea of unity was picked up by Vygotsky’s followers. Thus, A.V. Zaporozhets [4] in his study of emotions was responding to a question about the similarities and differences between cognitive and emotional

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¹ L.S. Vygotsky’s fears came true today to a great extent, which is manifested in excessive pedagogization interference of adults in socio-dramatic play, in total non-professional exploitation of games for training purposes.

regulation of the behaviour of a child and tried to understand their integration (though not in the role playing, but in the perception of works of art, particularly stories, during which “intelligent emotions” may be originated).

Another response was given by D.B. Elkonin [7] in the periodization of mental development built on the idea of the semantic and technical part of the action, each of which becoming the subject of appropriation at different stages of maturity. According to his concept of socio-dramatic play, qualitative features and developmental value of this type of children’s play is meant to construct special play situations when children will test, “simulate” human relations, identify why a person does something, and what the meaning of his actions really is. The technical part of the play action (its brief and conditional nature) is necessary to clearly identify the given specific item for a child.

In this respect, Elkonin paid attention mainly to the way the child, being within the play, assigns *social* (primarily professional) relationships between people. The symptom of the fact that the child has already appropriated human relationships is the fulfillment of the game’s rule, for example, before the “doctor” gives an injection, he dubs the skin with alcohol. An observer records the unity of affect and intellect in the play, i.e. high level of the play – the child not only *knows* that alcohol inhibits the introduction of infection, but also *sympathizes* with the patient (“Don’t worry, it doesn’t hurt”)².

How can such well-developed, ideal form of a child’s play be formed? Indeed, the unity of knowledge and feelings is not given, but only targeted, and it is not always the case. Emotions (e.g. unwillingness to submit to the rule), and understanding of the reasons of the rules by a child are studied separately from each other, since their interconnection is implied, but not experimentally mediated [9]. To make the child open and hold human relations/meaning of the action as the object of the play, it is not enough to focus on the adult’s assessment, i.e. just to *know* whether they are good or bad. Without the sense experience, the knowledge of the relationship shall be deemed to be purely mental and formal. Therefore, when during mediation of meanings through the play, an adult must be concerned that the child *experiences* the relationships, i.e. acts by making a distinction between feel/don’t feel the sense/relationships. This makes the psychologist face the following issues.

1. How can an *observer/diagnostician* “subtract” the content (behavioural “text”) of the play from its plot, i.e. be sure that the meaning/relationships are felt by a child? It can be hard to respond and it is related to the interpretation of the duality/symbolism of the play by the observer, since the child acts in real place/time, but gives an imaginary meaning to the event.

2. How can a *child* break through the plot to the meaning/relationship, and how can he distinguish the completeness/incompleteness of the feeling of the relationships?

3. In what way should the *psychologist-anthropotechnician* be engaged in a child’s play to initiate the child’s

living of relationships and feeling of his action? In other words, how should a joint play (interpsychic form) be built to get the transition to the advanced play?

These are new questions in terms of studying play. It used to be important for the necessary social emotions associated with the construction of collective relationships to appear during play; now, we are interested in the *internal* picture of play – a child feeling/building the image of the boundaries and possibilities of its actions, i.e. the way of the image reconstruction and implementation (A.V. Zaporozhets). After all, it is possible to master one’s behaviour (exemplary action) when a person feels what he is doing, and notices the difference between the model and his real actions. The boundary between the action “right-wrong” (source image and aspiration field are experienced in the play) is never given in its finished form, it must be found. The universal way of the strong feeling of the inner boundary is a multiple return transition from the “wrong” action to the “right” one, i.e. search for the resistance point, and the point of contact of yours with the other one. It is possible to pull out, “perceive” the meaning of the action (without possessing the natural agent of its strong feeling) only if it is objectified in metaphorical or symbolic form [5].

1. The first question is associated with psychological knowledge, and we respond to it as follows. A functional agent of the strong feeling of relationships is the *two-step form of play*, which is a common way to probe the meaning of the action, testifying to the act of development [8]. Children feel the meaning of the action when creating the play during its first step – Challenge (situation, the consequence of which is an action; the challenge function is to awaken the desire to act, lead to action), and then unfold the Answer (second step). They build the polarized playing space, cross the border between “theirs” and “others”, and resolve the role and internal conflict.

In the first step, the child “lays itself open” (e.g. as a mother, he/she goes into the forest, where Bogey Man lives), and deliberately takes a risk: for someone else’s place is dangerous and gives rise to fear. This emotional material of the play and the situation of the play affect child existentially (“crying as a patient” [3]). Then he/she seeks for the return role-playing action trying to ease the emotional tension provoked by the event played in the first step (“rejoices as the player” – saves the daughter). During the play, the child repeatedly tries to achieve a more accurate and powerful culmination of the same event (saving from a robber). The proof of the child’s bodily feeling of his actions is in his movements, posture, facial expressions (walk in the woods on tiptoe creeping quietly to prevent the monster from hearing anything, and out of the woods – upright, with a smile), the rate of movement (in the woods – slowly, out of the woods – quickly), vegetative reactions (delayed or rapid breath, tears, red-faced), and stops, pauses in the play. All of that testifies to the fact of the experiences associated with challenge and response (i.e. through “start to finish” of the play).

² Indicators of a socio-dramatic play proposed by D.B. Elkonin are widely used to diagnose its level of development in stages up to now.

The “organism” of the feeling the actions used by the child to implement his intention involves repeated tonic-kinetic transition (B.A. Arkhipov) during the movement of the child in the polarized playing space; a functional agent of its strong feeling of the sense in the play is connected with two-step form of the play.

2. When a child begins to play, it is only natural that he/she does not choose what kind of play it is: two-step or one-step play. He/she wants to be an adult (this is the *motive of the play*, according to D.B. Elkonin), and, since people’s attitudes may vary considerably, the content of a particular play depends on the emotional material of the play [8], the affectivity of which is the impetus for the start of the play, and retains its tension.

So, the idea which is to be identified in the play (*motive in the play*), is subject to the child only, this is its spontaneous choice. He/she deliberately unfolds the plot so that the intrigue of the play event may highlight not only human relationships, but itself as well: is he/she a hero or a nonentity? Thus, a girl in a terrible forest fell neither into the clutches of a wolf or into those of a bear, and saved her puppy, and even robbed the Bogey Man — she is not a coward, she’s a fearless heroine!

The unfolded two-step form of the play cannot happen straight away, since there are no “out-of-the-box” role-playing actions suitable for conflict/challenge and response, and a child has to look for, to try out, and to check their relationship by living through them by itself. Moreover, the child’s spontaneous feelings resist their cultural “recasting” (even when playing a part, it is difficult to give something that you want possess, but is not actually yours).

3. The third question refers to the interpsychic form of the play. Being in the play, the child is completely free to choose the subject, roles, and the partner, the construction of the playing space, so it is prohibited for an adult to prescribe to the child how he is to play Challenge and Answer. Interference in the free play space and in the children’s initiative can only lead to its stopping and then breaking up. In addition, all children have their own personal experience history, their own playing experience unknown to the adult. However, it is the adult who mediates the development, and includes the child into a new action. According to L.S. Vygotsky, we cannot say with responsibility about higher mental functions and origination of a new action (including its strong feeling), if we failed to build it together with the child. Thus, here we have a proneness to conflict, inconsistency in the very starting point of the mediation of the pretend play.

The start of any play mediation must be built as a communion in a child’s play, and joining the adult’s play to the children’s play. Here, there is a conflict, too — on the one hand, the adult’s play should contribute maximally to the child’s free play, but on the other hand, it does not mean that adults should only play on the same level as the child and wait for the child to “grow into” the advanced form of the play. An adult should not lose sight of the opportunities to create the space of possibilities of the child’s initiatives, he should help to ensure that the play situation be crystallized in the potential/future two-step action (to build spaces, challenges, etc.). The symbolic content of

the adult’s play will be read by a child, and it will test the adult’s play action in own play. The child’s play tests show the opposition/comparison of the new and “old” play action and, consequently, of the feeling of the differences between them, which helps adults to navigate in what’s happening during the play (signalling, whether the child “feels” the boundary between the familiar and the two-step play set by the adult). The content of the adult’s actions in mediation consists of support for the children’s initiatives through: a) noting the playing space by the child as the semantic-polarized one; b) determination by the child of its real place in it. To overcome the borders between semantic playing spaces means to contribute to a child’s strong feeling of its actions. An adult should also designate new semantic space in the play space, create one “network”, and draw the ties between them (“road maps”). He/she must not only give the child some time to pause between the play actions, but also impressively expect the child’s response, play in a certain rhythm, and keep the course of the play [8; 10].

Such formation of the socio-dramatic play is linked with some specific difficulties: while playing with a child, an adult should accept greater redundancy of play actions, their endless shuttles and repetitions. If the only thing an adult is waiting for is the moment when the child is finally going to play a two-step form of play, he is not capable of reading the child’s actions as a sample of feeling of what it is doing. When playing together with the child, the adult should hold the duality of the action, i.e. to be both in the play and out of the play, otherwise he will not be able to select the next step in the play.

Therefore, the unity of affect and intellect in socio-dramatic play is peculiar only to the act of playing the action when the play obtains a two-step form — wherein the emotional content of the play (affect) is covered by the cultural two-step form (“intelligence”).

The mediation of the sense of the actions in socio-dramatic play takes place as a two-step process. The transfer/acceptance of cultural patterns of the meaning of the actions is the first to be built through the child’s involvement by the adult in the fairy tale event; in the process of its perception, the child discovers an example of initiative. The text itself “teaches” the child to master the affect (the child *feels fear* when empathizing a fairy tale character who got into trouble), as the aesthetic form of the fairy tale organizes spontaneous feelings of a child, subjecting it to the structure of the text (it realizes that a fairy tale is a fiction, and ceases to be afraid).

Then, a child tries to take the initiative in free socio-dramatic play, wherein it overcomes the spontaneous feelings that it itself intentionally recreates in a Challenging situation. In the play Response to the Challenge addressed to a child under the circumstances of the first step, he/she adds “the resolution and the outcome to painful stress” [2, p. 311], and the unity of affect and intellect is typical of such a play.

The successful mediation of a two-step play by an adult is possible, if he/she is interested not merely in the origination of a two-step play, but gets involved into it, and maintains harmony between the two tasks in the act of mediation.

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