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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PLAY

Preface: The Biography of This Research

To the memory of my daughters Natasha and Galia
and their mother Ts.P. Nemanova, who
died tragically during the Great Patriotic War.

My interest in the psychology of children's play developed at the very beginning of the 1930s as a result of my observations of my little daughters' play and in connection with my teaching a course on child psychology. My notes on these observations were lost during the war and the siege of Leningrad and all I remember are a few episodes. Two of these follow.

On a school holiday, I ended up staying home alone with my two little girls, who were both preschoolers and attended kindergarten. Spending the day together was a holiday for all three of us. We read, drew, roughhoused, and acted silly. Everything was merry and noisy until time for lunch. I prepared the traditional

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Translated by Lydia Razran Stone.

farina porridge, which they had grown thoroughly tired of. They absolutely refused to eat and would not sit at the table.

Not wanting to ruin everyone's mood by resorting to force, I suggested to the girls that we play kindergarten. They agreed eagerly. I put on a white coat and turned into the teacher, and they, by putting on their school aprons, turned into the pupils. We began to play at doing everything that was done in kindergarten: first we drew, then, pretending to put on our coats, we took a walk outside, marching twice around the room, and then we read. Then in my role as teacher I offered them lunch consisting of the selfsame porridge. Without any protest, and even with signs of pleasure, they began to eat, trying to be as neat as possible; they carefully scraped their plates and even asked for more. In everything they did they were trying to portray well-behaved pupils, and they made a show of treating me as the teacher, obeying my every word without question and addressing me with exaggerated formality. The relationship of daughters to their father had changed into the relationship of pupils to their teacher and the relations between sisters into the relations between fellow pupils. This game was extremely abbreviated and general—the entire thing lasted only about a half-hour.

I also remember a game of hide and seek. The little girls hid and I looked for them. Their favorite place to hide in the room where we were playing was behind a clothes rack with clothes hanging on it. Of course, I could see where they were hiding but I did not let on, and for a long time I walked around the room saying, "Where have my girls disappeared to?" When I got close to the place where they were hiding I could hear that an entire drama was going on behind the clothes rack. The younger one wanted to jump out at me, while the older put her hand over her sister's mouth whispering "Be quiet!" and held her there by force. Finally, the younger one couldn't stand the tension and came out, running over to me with the words, "Here I am!" The older one came out in a disgruntled mood and announced that she was never going to play with her sister again because she was too small to know how to play properly. Such remarks showed me that, while the older one

saw the point of the game as playing her role and observing all the associated rules, the younger one saw it as interacting with me.

These observations provided the grounds for my hypothesis that the main aspect of play for preschoolers is the role that they are playing. As the child plays this role, his actions are transformed along with his relationship to reality. This gave rise to the hypothesis that the *imagined situation*, in which the child takes on the role of other people and performs actions and enters into relationships characteristic of them, is the *basic unit of play*. The essential aspect of the creation of this type a play situation is the transference of meaning from one object to another. This is not a new idea. J. Sully wrote: "The essence of children's play is the assumption of some role," and, "Here we encounter what may be the most interesting trait of children's play—the transformation of the most inconsequential and unpromising objects into real living things" (1901, pp. 47, 51).

When I became familiar with the literature, I found, that play, first, was considered by the experts to be the manifestation of an already well-developed imagination, and second, to be naturalistic (i.e., to arise out of instinctive tendencies) (see K. Groos, W. Stern, K. Bühler, and others). These opinions did not seem to me to correspond to the actual nature of play. It seemed strange to me that the function of the imagination, which is one of the most complex capacities, develops so early, and I thought that, perhaps, it was the other way around, that play is the activity in which imagination first shows itself. It was also difficult for me to accept the notion that play is an instinctive activity, identical young animals and children.

In late 1932, I expressed these views in a lecture to students and a report to the A.I. Herzen Pedagogic Institute of Leningrad. My views were met with relatively severe criticism and the only person who supported the basic tenets of the report was Lev Semenovich Vygotsky (who in those years was traveling to Leningrad to give lectures and oversee graduate students), whose assistant I was at the time.

The problem of children's play interested L.S. Vygotsky in con-

nection with his own work on the psychology of art and his research on the development of the sign mediation.

In early 1933, he gave a series of lectures at the Herzen Institute on the psychology of preschool children, including a lecture on play. With his characteristic breadth and depth, Vygotsky elaborated this problem, representing it as the central one for understanding developmental psychology in the preschool years.¹ The ideas Vygotsky expressed in this lecture formed the foundation of my further investigations of the psychology of play.

In April 1933, in connection with the research I was starting, Vygotsky wrote to me:

I want to make some very brief remarks on all this. About play: (a) you need to think of new experiments—of the type that I mentioned in my lecture in connection with the rules of play; think over the material from my lecture and my notes so that we can readily come to a full understanding of each other in Leningrad;² (b) in your lecture you spoke of Groos.³ As a naturalist he is doomed—his is an extremely naturalistic theory, but on our new path we will encounter his ideas in a new and enriched form: play—its role in development—the fact that it is oriented to the future—what grows out of it: rules—discipline of the will (work during the school years), the imagined situation—the road to abstraction. The unity of the imagined situation and the rules—again Spinoza's problem.⁴ Evidently the stages of thinking are, in essence, the same as the stages of the will (from a systems perspective on consciousness—this is understandable and predictable); (c) that imagination begins to develop through play—you are absolutely right in that, the idea is convincing and of central importance; before play there is no imagination. But let us add one more rule + imitation (which, it seems to me, is just as central and just as related to the imagined situation)—and we will have the main features of play and having determined what they are, we will create a new theory of play.

The first works in this new area, begun while Vygotsky was still alive, were conducted by O.N. Varshavskaia, who was experimentally investigating the relationship between the word, the object and the action in children's play and preplay activity, and E.A. Gershenson, who was studying the relationship between the imagined situation and the rules in play.

Unfortunately, a great deal of the material we obtained was lost during the siege of Leningrad. I have used what remains in the appropriate chapters of this book.

After Vygotsky's death in 1934, I became very closely involved with a research group of his colleagues and students conducting these investigations under the leadership of A.N. Leontiev in Kharkov.⁵ In early 1936 at the psychology department of the Kharkov Pedagogic Institute I presented to this group the first experimental facts and theoretical views on play that had been developed by the Leningrad group of psychologists under my general direction. Among those in this group, I would like to cite, first and foremost, O.N. Varshavskaia, E.A. Gershenzon, T.E. Konnikova, and F.I. Fradkina.

In April 1936, Leontiev wrote to me:

[T]he issues that remained after your report are still alive, they are still remembered, and I want to assign them to you now, although with a delay, for the future. You said that a condition for the development of play is the occurrence of unrealizable intentions. Is that really the case? It seems to me that something else is involved here. Unrealizable intentions existed even earlier, maybe starting in the very first hours of life. What seems to me to be going on here is that, in connection with the successful development of speech there develops a level of "ideational activity" (= consciousness). And this means that we must add a third possibility to the previous alternatives of either realizable or unrealizable—an intention may also be realized on the ideational level. Initially, this level requires support from objects, actions (actual ones), and situation. This gives the activity its particular character, which only a little later can be dissociated from the situation and take on a new form—the form of autistic daydreams. (Nikolenka in Tolstoy's *Childhood*)

Second, the main thing in play is the "imagined situation." Thus we have to study the internal relationship between the imagined situation and the mastery of social relationships. Perhaps, we will be able to propose and demonstrate that social relationships themselves generate the ideational level and when this level develops, the relationships pass through from it into actual activity?

And last, we, of course, cannot resolve the question of the motive forces that give rise to play without understanding its prehistory. And

here it is clear, at least if you agree with the first point, that prehistory is “play” that takes place before age three. This “play” also realizes intentions but, like all “nonplay” only in the form of a binary choice; thus at age three a new form for realizing these intentions in play proper develops, that is, human play (play that is possible only under conditions of the human psyche = consciousness). But this is the whole point. This is the main thing that lodged in my mind after your “Play Lecture,” and time has filtered it into a series of questions.

Leontiev’s ideas, first of all, about the need to study the internal connections between the mastery of social relationships and the imagined situation, and, second, about the importance of studying the prehistory of play to understanding its nature had an important influence on my further research.

From that time, that is, beginning in 1936, my scientific work was intimately associated with respect to theory with Leontiev’s own work and that of his collaborators, and starting in 1938 our research was also organizationally associated through the School of Psychology of the N.K. Krupskoi Pedagogical Institute of Leningrad, which Leontiev headed and where we worked together. During this comparatively short period (1937–41) G.D. Lukov conducted a very important experimental investigation in Kharkov on the “Child’s Awareness of Language During the Process of Play” [Ob osoznanii rebenkom rechi v protsesse igry] (1937), while in Leningrad F.I. Fradkina investigated “The Psychology of Play in Early Childhood. The Genetic Roots of Role Playing” [Psiokhologiiia igry v rannem detstve. Geneticheskie korni rolevoi igry] (1946). These works represent the entirety of prewar research in this new area. The first publication on this research was authored by Leontiev, who, in the article “Psychological Principles of Pre-school Play” [Psikhologiiia igry v rannem detstve] (1944) gave a condensed outline of our approach to this issue and summarized the results we had attained. The Great Patriotic War interrupted our investigations. After the war research on the psychology of children’s play was resumed in Moscow, mainly in the Institute of Psychology.

Under the direction of Leontiev and A.V. Zaporozhets, a series of important experimental studies was conducted by L.S. Slavina

(1948), Z.V. Manuilenko (1948), Ia.Z. Neverovich (1948), A.V. Cherkov (1949), and Z.M. Boguslavskaja (1955), all of which advanced our understanding of play. Until 1953, my participation in this research was limited to reports and publications (1948, 1949), and only in 1953 was I able to return to experimental and theoretical work on this question. I focused, first, on elucidating the historical origin of children's play; second, on discovering the social content of play as the primary activity of preschool children; third, on the issue of symbolism and the relationships among the object, the word, and the action in play; and finally on general theoretical issues and on critical analyses of existing theories of play. I have thought it essential to provide a short outline of the course of our research on children's play in order to show that a large group of scientists has participated in the development of this topic and in the creation of a new psychological theory of play. I participated directly only in the very first and very last phases of this process. Of course, the development of a psychological theory of children's play, starting with Vygotsky's work and continuing to the present, was organically linked to research on general issues of psychology and the theory of child development. The theoretical and experimental investigations, especially those performed by Leontiev, L.V. Zaporozhets, and P.Ia. Galperin, have become an integral part of our research in the psychology of play. Every new achievement in the overall theory caused us to rethink our views of play, to add new facts, and to propose new hypotheses.

A very important characteristic of the investigations in the psychology of children's play performed by the psychologists who were disciples of Vygotsky was the fact that they were not directed by a single will and single mind, nor did we all work in a single organizational center and thus they did not develop within a particularly logical sequence in which the gaps in our knowledge disappeared one by one in the unknown area of children's play. Nevertheless, this was a group effort united by the common theoretical principles Vygotsky outlined and each of these made their contribution to the further development of the area. Of course, because of the fragmentation, not all of the problems were cov-

ered by the theoretical and experimental research works and many gaps still remain.

In a relatively small number of propositions, we can enumerate the new contributions that this group effort made to the psychology of children's play: (1) the development of the hypothesis of the historical origin of the form of play that is typical of today's preschoolers, and the theoretical demonstration that role playing is social in its origin and thus in its nature; (2) the discovery of the conditions under which this form of play arises in ontogeny and the demonstration that play on the threshold of the preschool years does not develop spontaneously, but forms under the influence of child-rearing; (3) identification of the primary units of play, discovery of the internal psychological structure of play, and the tracing of its development and decay; (4) elucidation of the fact that during the preschool years play is especially sensitive to the area of human work and human interrelationships, and establishment of the fact that the basic content of play is the human being—his work and the relations of adults to each other, and because of this, play is a form of orientation to the tasks and themes of human activities; (5) it was established that the play technique—the transfer of meanings from one object to another, the abbreviated and generalized nature of playing—is the most important precondition for the child's initial mastery of social relationships, their unique modeling in the form of play; (6) identification in play of children's actual relations to each other, which represents practice for group efforts; and (7) elucidation of the functions of play in the psychological development of preschool children.

In this list we also considered new experimental facts as well as the theoretical generalizations and hypotheses that inevitably accompanied our research.

Because I was aware of the limits of the steps that were taken in these investigations on the psychology of children's play, and also because I was occupied with other areas of child psychology, for a long time I hesitated to write this book. Only the insistent requests of my colleagues, especially Galperin, A.V. Zaporozhets, and A.N. Leontiev, have compelled me to begin this work.

There is never full correspondence between the logic of research and the logical presentation of its results. The structure of this book does not reflect the history and logic of our research. Rather the order of presentation is the reverse of the order of research. This book begins with chapters presenting our understanding of a well-developed form of children's play, its social essence and psychological nature—an understanding that developed in the course of our research and was formulated at the very end of our work.

Next, in a very general form, comes an explanation of our understanding of play as a unique form of children's activity, the subject of which is the adult—his work and the system of his relationships with others. We have considered it essential to give a historical and critical analysis of the main theories of play and this is the subject of the third chapter. The main thing about this overview has been to show the lack of justification for the naturalistic theories and to present them in counterpoint to the social-historical approach to the problem of the occurrence and development of human play, without which the psychological nature of play cannot be understood. A critical analysis of the theory of play forms an integral part of our work on the psychology of play. The need for this historical critical review was also dictated by the fact that the literature does not contain any significant reviews of the development of theories of play or their analysis. Because this book is intended not only for specialists in the psychology of play but also for a broader circle of readers, we have been compelled to expand the presentation of the various theories.

The first three chapters [published in this and the following issue of the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology*] comprise the first part of the book, which might be called the theoretical part.

The second part [not translated here] contains experimental material that casts light on the initial occurrence of play in the course of the individual child's development (chapter 4); the development of the major structural components of play and the changes in their relationships over the course of development (chapter 5); and finally, the significance of play for psychological development

(chapter 6). These chapters use material from experimental investigations conducted on the basis of ideas advanced more than forty years ago by the eminent psychologist L.S. Vygotsky.

The experimental material in these chapters was collected before our understanding of play had completely coalesced. This material served as the foundation on which we built our theoretical view.

We are far from believing that we have completely discovered the psychological nature of play. With this book we wanted to make a strong contribution to the development of a psychological area in which interest is continually increasing. For this reason we did not try to maintain overly rigorous logic in our presentation. We allowed ourselves to express certain hypotheses, proposals, and even guesses, that require confirmation by future empirical work.

Moscow, January 1977

Notes

1. The transcript of this lecture given by Vygotsky was published in the journal *Voprosy psikhologii* (1966, no. 6).
2. Vygotsky left me the notes to this lecture. The portion devoted to play is published in the appendix to this book [see the *Journal of Russian and East European Psychology* 43, no. 2 (March–April 2005)].
3. He is referring to the transcript of my lecture delivered to the students.
4. He is talking about the problem he was involved with, of the unity of the intellect and the will.
5. This group included B.I. Asnin, L.I. Bozhovich, P.Ia Galperin, A.V. Zaporozhets, P.I. Zinchenko, G.D. Lukov, and others.

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