

Contemporary Adolescence through the Prism of the Cultural-Historical Theory: on the Issue of Experimenting with Roles

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The article focuses on the main aspects of understanding adolescence in the framework of the Cultural-Historical Theory. Such concepts as new formations, social situation of development and leading activity are discussed in relation to this age period. It is argued that controversies about the content of development in adolescence are due to the fact that so far no “ideal form” has been clearly indicated for this age. An attempt is made to discuss a little-known text by L.S. Vygotsky – “Concrete human psychology” – where the issue of social roles and the importance of investigating them in adolescence was highlighted. L.S. Vygotsky interpreted the notion of role as a key mechanism, responsible for the regulation of higher mental functions in various social interactions. For a number of reasons – particularly, historical – the concept of role has long remained almost neglected in Russian psychology. Thus, the article draws attention to the issue of role development in adolescence and focuses on the problem of experimenting with roles as a particular system of activities during this age period.

Keywords: adolescence, psychological age, new formations, social situation of development, leading activity, drama, ideal form, social role, experimenting with roles, role development.

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Cultural-Historical Theory: main ideas

Cultural-Historical Theory is a concept that focuses on *the development of consciousness*, or, more particularly, on *the development of higher mental functions*. The key word here is **development**, as, in contrast to traditional psychological concepts, Cultural-Historical Theory (CHT) does not study the “stiffened” (already mature) products of human psyche, but the very process of their formation – in other words, **genesis**. Understanding development in the framework of the CHT is rooted in German classical philosophy and, particularly, in Marxism. Therefore the founder of the CHT L.S. Vygotsky insisted that development represents a *holistic, lasting change of a system*, which should not be reduced to the development of its parts: “*development does not occur in a way that separate aspects of the child’s personality change, resulting in the reorganization of the personality in general, – there is an inverse relationship in development: the child’s personality changes as a whole in its internal constitution, and the laws of the changes of this whole determine the movement of each of its parts*” [6, p. 256]. Thus, in the logic

of the CHT, development results not in the emergence of new functions per se, but in the emergence of **a new system of functions and relationships**.

L.S. Vygotsky formulated the general genetic law of development that underlies his theory: “... *every function in the child’s cultural development appears on the stage twice, that is, on two planes – first on the social plane and then on the psychological plane; first among people as an inter-psychological category and then within the child as an intra-psychological category*” [5, p. 145]. According to M.G. Yaroshevsky, in contrast with J. Piaget, who referred to the image of a ladder to illustrate the idea of the stages of development, L.S. Vygotsky used the word “stage” as a dramaturgical concept, implying that the “drama of development” occurs as the result of collision between two “planes”: individual and social [24].

N.N. Veresov draws attention to the concept of “category” that Vygotsky uses in the formulation of the general genetic law (and that was unfortunately omitted in the majority of translations into English). Veresov argues, that in Russian pre-revolutionary theatre vocabulary² the word “category” meant a “*dramatic event*,

¹ All the translations from Russian in this paper are made by the author.

² In his youth L. Vygotsky was very much interested in theatre – particularly, he wrote critical reviews. According to M.G. Yaroshevsky, this interest later led Vygotsky to psychology [24].

a collision of characters on the stage” [30, p. 13–30]. In his opinion, Vygotsky “had to use the word “category” to emphasize the character of the social relation, which becomes the individual function. The social relation he means is not an ordinary social relation between the two individuals. This is a social relation that appears as a category, i.e. as an emotionally colored and experienced collision, the contradiction between the two people, the dramatic event, drama between two individuals. Being emotionally and mentally experienced as a social drama (on the social plane) it later becomes the individual intra-psychological category” [30, p. 6].

“The drama of development” for Vygotsky is not “impersonalized external circumstances, but a dynamic system of mutual orientations, motivations and actions, which has its own “story line” (plot) and where personality is shaped as a participant of drama” [24, p. 273]. The key constituent of this system is **perezhivaniye**, which Vygotsky understands as a prism that “determines the influence of the environment on the child’s psychological development” [4, p. 75].

For Vygotsky “perezhivaniye” represents a unique bi-directional (both individual and social) unit that determines how external circumstances are subjectively experienced and lived through by the child. In other words, social situation as the source of development influences the developmental process, but it is **perezhivaniye that gives direction to this influence** [4].

Vygotsky’s idea **about the interaction of the real and ideal forms** is essential for understanding the logic of development in the framework of the CHT. According to Vygotsky, a child as a bearer of the “real” (present) form develops in the process of interaction with the adult (or an older child) as with the bearer of the “ideal” (already developed) form. This interaction is always mediated by cultural tools — that means, it is **sign-mediated**. It is in the very process of interaction between the “real” and the “ideal” forms that the child gradually acquires (internalizes) those functions that are already developed in the adult, and this determines “the highest originality” of human development, since in no other type of development “it occurs that at the moment when the primary form emerges ... there is already the highest, ideal form, that should appear as the result of development, and that it directly interacts with the first steps that the child makes on the way of development of this primary or seed shape form” [6, p. 395]. The interaction of the “real” and “ideal” forms creates the **zone of proximal development**, which is determined by the boundaries of what a child can do on their own and what — with the assistance of adult: “Zone of proximal development — is the distance between the child’s actual level of development, which is determined by the problems that a child can solve on their own, and the level of possible (potential) development, which is determined by the problems that a child can solve under adult guidance or in collaboration with more intelligent peers” [7, p. 42]. **Zone of proximal development** represents the field of possibilities that the child discovers in the process of cooperation with the adult and that he/she will internalize in the process of this interaction: “What the child is capable of doing today in collaboration, is what he/she will

be capable of doing on their own tomorrow” [6, p. 264]. According to L.F. Obuchova, the concept of the **zone of proximal development** «is a logical consequence of the general genetic law of development of higher mental functions, which first emerge in joint activity, in cooperation with other people, and gradually become the subject’s inner mental processes. When a mental process emerges in joint activity, it is in the zone of proximal development; after its formation, it becomes a form of the subject’s actual development [15, p. 184].

Thus, in this sense Vygotsky considered social environment as a source of development, where any higher mental function or process first emerge as **a social relation between people**. In the process of interaction between the “real” and “ideal” forms this relation is later “internalized”, that is, it moves from the external to the internal plane, and turns into the child’s personal ability. It is important to highlight that not every social relation is “internalized”, but only the relation that emerges an emotionally colored contradiction, as “a small drama between people” [3]. That is why Vygotsky argues that “Drama is the dynamics of personality” [3] and that development may be interpreted as “a series of dramatic events” [3]. Thus, the essence of the experimental genetic method, elaborated by Vygotsky for studying the development of consciousness, consists in “experimental unfolding of a higher mental process into the drama, which happened between the people” [5, p. 145].

Psychological age — a unit of analysis of the child’s development

While talking about characteristic traits of a child’s development in different periods, L.S. Vygotsky used the notion of “**psychological age**”, which he defined as “a relatively closed loop of the child’s development that has its particular structure and dynamics”. The concept of “**psychological age**” was introduced by Vygotsky as a unit of analysis of the child’s development. He argued that different psychological ages “represent such kind of a holistic dynamic entity, such kind of structure, that determines the role and the importance of each particular line of development” [6, p. 256].

Based on the character of development, Vygotsky divided psychological ages into two groups — **lytical** (stable), when development takes place in a form of “microscopic changes in the child’s personality” [6, p. 249], that are accumulated and then reveal themselves in new formations, and **critical**, when development acquires a rapid, “sometimes disastrous character” and reminds “a revolutionary scenario both in the speed and in the content of the changes taking place” [6, p. 249]. Thus, critical ages are particular periods when “qualitative leaps in development” take place, leading to the reorganization of the existing system of links and relations. Vygotsky insisted on a dialectical understanding of crisis as of an inseparable unity of constructive and destructive aspects, where maturation of the “novel” is impossible without painful destruction of the “old”. Therefore, in the logic of the

Cultural-Historical Theory, crisis is regarded as an integral constituent of the developmental process – without crisis there is no development.

According to K.N. Polivanova, Vygotsky's idea about the alternation of critical and lyrical periods reflects *the dynamics of the mutual transitions of the “real” and “ideal” forms*. In her opinion, the crisis may be interpreted as *“an ultimate exposure, first of all for the child himself, of the always implicitly present co-existence of the real and ideal forms”* [17].

For describing the structure and dynamics of psychological ages L.S. Vygotsky introduced two more concepts – *“psychological new formation”* and *“social situation of development”*. Let us have a closer look at them.

Under *“psychological new formation (neoformation)”* Vygotsky understood *“a new type of the personality's structure and activity, those mental and social changes, that first occur at this age period and in the main and essential determine the child's consciousness, their relation to the environment, their internal and external life, the very course of their development at this stage”* [6, p. 248]. The key word here is “personality's structure”, as the notion of “new formation” does not imply separate psychological functions, but *systems of functions and relations*.

L.S. Vygotsky used the term *“social situation of development”* to indicate *“an absolutely peculiar, specific for this age, exclusive, unique, one and only relationship between the child and the surrounding environment, first of all – social”*. Vygotsky argued that social situation of development *“represents the starting point for all the dynamic changes that take place in the course of this age period. It determines entirely and fully the forms and the ways, which the child follows in acquiring new and novel characteristics of personality, drawing them from social reality as from the main source of development – the very way itself, how social becomes individual”* [6, p. 258–259]. Thus, for Vygotsky, not every kind of relation between the child and the environment can be indicated by the notion of the social situation of development, but a very particular kind of relation, represented in the interaction of the “real” and “ideal” forms.

While talking about the “real” and “ideal” forms L. Vygotsky was mostly using the concept of “interaction”. However, in some of his texts the concept of activity (“deyatelnost”) also appears. According to D.V. Lubovsky, Vygotsky, with *“his inherent Mozartian easiness”*, left a sketch of a new direction of research that was later elaborated by his disciples – particularly, by A.N. Leont'ev – and became known as the “Activity Approach” [13]. *“We can certainly argue, whether the “psychological activity theory” of A.N. Leont'ev and his ... colleagues is a direct sequel and further elaboration of Vygotsky's understanding of activity ..., but there are no doubts that Vygotsky had repeatedly expressed these ideas”* [11, p. 8].

According to V.V. Davydov, A.N. Leont'ev, *“without distorting anything in the essence of Vygotsky's approach to the conditions of human development, replaced the word “social situation” by the notion of “development of activ-*

ity” [9, p. 32]. Leont'ev argued that for every age period the so-called “leading activity” is to be indicated, which determines the course of development on a concrete age stage. The leading activity has the following characteristics [10]:

- 1) in this activity emerge and differentiate other, new types of activity;
- 2) in this activity certain mental processes are formed or reorganized;
- 3) it is on this activity that the main psychological changes of the child's personality, observed at a given period of development, depend.

Thus, according to A.N. Leont'ev, *“leading activity – is an activity, whose development determines the main changes in mental processes and psychological peculiarities of the child's personality at a given stage of their development”* [10, p. 285–286]. Interestingly enough, for a number of researchers the concept of the “leading activity” is identical to that of “social situation of development”. For A.N. Leont'ev himself *“these two concepts – “leading activity” and “social situation of development” are almost synonyms”* [2]. V.V. Davidov shared a similar point of view, regarding the notion of the “leading activity” as a *“direct concretization of the notion of a child's social situation of development in a particular age”* [2].

According to D.V. Lubovsky and N.N. Veresov, for L.S. Vygotsky himself *“these two concepts differed in content and were intended for indicating different kinds of psychological reality”* [13], [2]. However, this discussion is beyond the content of this paper. The majority of contemporary scholars regard these concepts as independent, but interrelated characteristics of each age period (together with the concept of “new formation”).

It is important to highlight that all the notions discussed – psychological new formations, social situation of development and leading activity – may be interpreted in the logic of the linear-stage approach, where development is regarded as a schematic process of change of the leading activities, which results in the emergence of psychological new formations and triggers shifts in the social situation of development. This point of view seems to be shared by many scholars who claim to elaborate CHT. However, in the light of Vygotsky's idea about drama and dialectical character of the process of development, such interpretation is clearly reductionist. D.B. El'konin himself constantly emphasized that the leading activity must not be considered in isolation from other activities that take place on different age stages: *“every period represents a system of various types of activities, with each type having a particular function”* and the leading activity *“being central in the structure and system of these activities”* [22, p. 510].

New formations, social situation of development and leading activity are unique for each psychological age. However, adolescence is probably the most controversial among the age stages, since in the framework of CHT there is still no consensus on these key constituents of this period of development. For example, L.S. Vygotsky indicated three new formations of adolescence – *theoreti-*

*cal thinking, self-awareness and reflection*³. Later such scholars as D.B. El'konin and T.V. Dragunova added to this list the so-called "*feeling of adulthood*"⁴, however, many researchers do not regard it as a new formation.

This article focuses on the classical approaches to leading activity of adolescents, existing in the framework of CHT, as well as on the attempts to give a novel interpretation to this phenomenon in the light of contemporary socio-cultural realities.

Contemporary views on the issue of leading activity in adolescence

The concept of "leading activity", introduced by L.S. Vygotsky, underlies the periodization of development, elaborated by D.B. El'konin. Describing the general direction of development in childhood, El'konin indicated a contradiction in the very system of the leading activity, which reveals itself between two aspects of the activity — *operationally-technical* and *emotionally-motivational*. In the process of the child's development these two aspects rise into the front one by one, triggering alternation of leading activities and determining the course of development on every particular age stage: «*All of the three ages — early childhood, childhood and adolescence — are built on the same principle and include two naturally interrelated periods. The transition from one age period to the other occurs with the apparition of discrepancy between operationally-technical possibilities of the child and those tasks and motives that they had emerged from*» [23]. Thus, each stage of childhood consists of two interrelated periods: during the first period the child primarily acquires tasks, motives and norms of human activity, while during the second period — means of actions with objects. Therefore, El'konin indicates two types of systems: system "child — social adult" and "child — social object" [23]. The alternation of these two types of systems is accompanied by the alternation of the leading activities in the course of the child's development.

As we know, D.B. El'konin considered that the leading activity of adolescence is the "*activity of personal communication*", which refers to the system "child — social adult" and consists in "*building relations with peers on the basis of particular moral and ethical norms*" [23, p. 17]. However, according to N.N. Veresov, strictly speaking, communication may not be regarded as a leading activity, as in A.N. Leont'ev's logic, leading activity should have a particular structure (tasks, actions, operations etc.), which has not been determined for the activity of communication [2]. K.N. Polivanova shares the same point of view, arguing that D.B. El'konin did not give an analysis of communication in the logic of the activity approach, leaving aside a whole range of essential questions: «*The issue of the mechanism of how the external activity of communication (interpsychological form) turns into a particular personal ability (intra-*

psychological form) remains unclear, as well as the issue of what ability can be regarded as a new formation of adolescence. Moreover, the question about the very content of the personal communication remains open (we do not know what the conversation between adolescents is about) [16, p. 14].

Thus, many scholars do not share D.B. El'konin's point of view about personal communication being the leading activity of adolescence. The alternatives are: *socially-significant (socially meaningful)* activity suggested by V.V. Davydov, *socially-useful activity* proposed by D.I. Feldstein, *socially-psychological experimenting* indicated by G.A. Zuckerman, and *project activity* elaborated by K.N. Polivanova. There is also a point of view that adolescence is characterized by a number of various types of activities (V.P. Zinchenko, O.V. Lishin, B.G. Mesheryakov).

Interestingly enough, while discussing the leading activity of adolescence itself, many scholars agree on its essential characteristics. A.L. Liberman for example argues that the leading activity of this age period has to be "*play-like in its type, socially-modelling in its form and socially-meaningful in its content*" [12, p. 122]. It also should allow adolescents to try themselves in various socially meaningful roles and positions. K.N. Polivanova also highlights that the leading activity of adolescence "*has to ensure the formation (or emergence) of a particular type of subjectivity (similar to the one emerging in play)*" [16, p. 14].

The question is: why there are so many different opinions about the issue of the leading activity in adolescence in the framework of the same scientific school? There are at least two explanations for that:

1. As we know, the leading activity emerges in lytical, or stable ages. If, following L.S. Vygotsky, we consider adolescence a lytical period, then we may indicate its leading activity (keeping in mind that it is central in *the system* of other activities of this age). However, if we consider adolescence a critical period — following e.g. L.I. Boghovich — then, we are not supposed to indicate any leading activity.

2. For indicating the leading activity of adolescence it is necessary to determine the "ideal form" of this period of development. If for early childhood "theoretical relation to reality" has been indicated and described as the ideal form (V.V. Davydov), this has not been done in relation to adolescence. Thus, one of the main questions remains open in relation to adolescence: interaction with which "ideal" form creates the "zone of proximal development" in adolescence and determines the course of development at this age period?

On the one hand, the answer to the question about the "ideal" form of adolescence seems to be obviously connected with the process of transition to the "world of adults" — that is, with socialization. On the other hand, while indicating socialization as one of the main tasks of this age period, almost none of the scholars indicates the

³ Понятийное мышление, самосознание и рефлексия.

⁴ Чувство взрослости.

mechanisms of this process and does not describe it in the context of adolescent activities.

Thus, taking into consideration what has been said above, it is extremely interesting to discuss the issue of development in adolescence, considering the fact that adolescents' socialization presupposes their entering **the system of role relations**. It is by acquiring new roles that adolescent becomes part of the adult world and tries to find their place in it. In this context **the system of roles**, existing in the culture, where adolescent is brought up, may be regarded as the "ideal" form of adolescence. Interiorization of these roles determines the content of development in adolescence and takes place in the activity, which may be coined as "**experimenting with roles**". Experimenting with roles may be considered not just the leading activity of adolescence, but a system of activities, connected with "trying on" various social roles and types of role interaction [20].

Let us have a closer look at the possible interpretations of the concept of "role" and "role relationships" in the system of CHT.

Role as the "ideal" form of adolescence

According to J. Heiss, all the diversity of the existing role theories falls into two main groups, representing either structuralism or interactionism [27]. The first group relies on a sociological understanding of role behavior and studies its objectively observed manifestations (R. Linton, R. Merton, T. Parsons). The second group of theories mostly focuses on subjective, or personal aspects of role behavior, particularly on the social and psychological mechanisms and patterns of human's perception and realization of various roles (G.H. Mead, H. Blumer, T. Shibusani). A specific group of role theories is represented by the socio-dramaturgical approach, elaborated in the works of E. Goffman and his followers, who draw a bold parallel between social reality and drama, describing social interaction in terms of theatre (actor, stage etc.).

In Russian psychology the issue of roles was neglected for a long time. The interest for role concepts arose only in the 60–70s, and for many years the relation to the very idea of social roles remained radically negative. For some reason (one of them is connected with inaccurate translations of foreign texts into Russian), for a long time the term "social role" in Russian psychology was associated with a mask, which an individual "*puts on, hiding and breaking their real personality*" [14, p. 10–11]. Though this idea is far from the content of the majority of role theories, a negative attitude to role concepts has dominated in Russian psychology for years. E.g. A.N. Leont'ev wrote: "*... The idea of reducing personality to a set or "roles", performed by the human, is, despite all the reservations of its advocates, one of the most terrible*" [10, p. 193]. And further: "*The key objections against "role theories" are not the ones, which criticize particular aspects of understanding the place of roles in the structure of personality, but those, which reject the very idea of connecting personality with programmed behavior*" [10, p. 193].

Half a century later, the majority of Russian scholars still avoid speaking about roles in the context of developmental psychology (probably, with the exception of role in child play). The concept of role in Russian scientific tradition is primarily used by sociologists or by social psychologists, who regard it as a social function. The big Russian psychological dictionary defines role as "*forms of behavior (actions), expected from the subject due to their belonging to certain groups or social positions*" [1, p. 579]. Such definition reduces role exclusively to a socially determined pattern, which the individual reproduces in the process of social interaction. And each human is believed to have a particular "set" of roles that he or she performs depending on the social situation. Apparently, this kind of interpretation completely ignores personal (individual) aspects of role behavior — role is regarded exclusively as an instrument, that the human uses for efficient functioning in society. From this perspective there is no way to speak about development — thus, various aspects of role behavior are by default excluded from the field of interests of developmental psychology. However, could that be true, that roles, which literally permeate human existence, mediating social interactions, represent nothing but masks, which force the individual to passively perform programmed behavioral patterns? Does not it look like pure reductionism? And is there, probably, any other perspective, allowing to consider the issue of role in the context of development?

Strange as it might seem, the answer to this question was given by L.S. Vygotsky. It was the founder of the CHT himself who became one of the first Russian scholars to consider the issue of social role in an unprejudiced way. In his work "Concrete human psychology", which is almost unknown, L.S. Vygotsky pointed to the role as to **a mechanism that regulates the relationship between higher mental functions**: "*Social roles (judge, doctor) determines the hierarchy of functions: that is, functions change hierarchy in different spheres of social life. Their collision = drama*" [3, p. 1030]. For explaining this idea Vygotsky gives an example of a judge, who has to pass judgement on his unfaithful wife and faces a collision of "*the professional complex and family complex*". As a judge, he condemns his wife's wrong behavior ("*thinking regulates passion*"), as a husband he keeps loving her ("*passion prevails over thinking*"). The collision of the two "complexes" is a drama, which requires resolution. And, as we know, according to Vygotsky, drama is the key mechanism of development [3, p. 1030].

Thus, L.S. Vygotsky offers a completely different view on the issue of social role, which makes the idea of "masks" and "programmed behavior" in relation to roles totally unacceptable. For Vygotsky, social role represents a link between social environment and personality. Thus, on the one hand, roles regulate the hierarchy of functions depending on the social situation, determining certain aspects of the individual's behavior (e.g. the judge *has to* impose a sentence). On the other hand, the resolution of the emerging role collisions ("dramas" that are unavoidable since the individual is included into a complex system of roles and role relations), depends on the human, who

constantly faces the necessity of choice (what will prevail: professional duty or personal attitude?)

From here we can make at least two important conclusions. 1. Rejecting the interpretation of role as of an imposed “mask”, it is possible to speak about the inseparable unity of personality and their roles. Role behavior is always refracted through the prism of personality. 2. “Role dramas” (conflicts, collisions) may be regarded as an indispensable constituent of the process of development.

Thus, studying “role dramas” is particularly important in adolescence, when the human for the first time gets actively involved in the system of role relations. L.S. Vygotsky draws attention exactly to the necessity of investigating the hierarchy of higher mental functions, and, consequently, roles, as their regulating mechanisms, in relation to adolescence: “*The task in adolescents ... to study different spheres of behavior (professional complex etc.), the structure and hierarchy of functions, their relations and collisions*” [3, p. 1031]. Therefore, Vygotsky points out, that investigating the hierarchy of functions, regulated by roles in various spheres of adolescent behavior, represents one of the key research aims. Without resolving this task, it is impossible to answer the question about the content of development at this age period.

Despite the fact that at the turn of the century numerous Russian scholars turned to the issue of roles (G.M. Andreeva, L.P. Bujeva, A.L. Groijsman, M.I. Enikeeva, L.G. Ionin, E.I. Kravchenko, R. Ch. Shakurov), the task, indicated by L.S. Vygotsky in relation to adolescence, still has not been resolved. This fact can be partly explained by the sociological understanding of role, which still dominates in contemporary Russian psychology, and, thus, by very few attempts to explain role behavior in its connection with personality. However, the necessity to study role development is imposed by the everyday reality of contemporary adolescent practices. As one of the leading Russian scholars of adolescence A.M. Prihozhan argued in 2015, “*experimenting with roles literally permeates adolescents’ life – from testing the waters of allowable behavior, to setting and virtual resolving of life-meaningful tasks. The latter most often reveals itself in mental gaming of future professional and personal roles*” [18, p. 40]. Indeed, the life of contemporary adolescents is inseparably connected with “trying on” various patterns of role behavior. This experimenting seems to be not just an interesting way of spending time, but a means of resolving important age tasks. And here many research questions arise: what experimenting with roles is like in its form and in its content? What roles do adolescents try on? And how exactly this experimenting can create a zone of proximal development at this age stage?

“Experimenting” with roles takes different forms in contemporary adolescent practices. For example, adolescent subcultures, (“goths”, “emos” etc.), as well as various role movements (e.g. “tolkienists”), which have gained extraordinary popularity in the last few decades,

offer adolescents particular philosophical and esthetic patterns and create conditions for trying on new looks, styles and images. However, the most popular cultural platforms for experimenting are now found in virtual spaces – particularly, in role play games and social networks, whose integral attributes include elaboration of virtual (cyber) identities.

Since adolescents face an objective challenge of entering the system of social roles and relations, existing in the society, they do need a culturally-organized space for preliminary “training”. Thus, various kinds of adolescent activities, particularly games and communication in virtual spaces, may be regarded as forms of experimenting with roles. By this kind of experimenting adolescents resolve the task of “trying on” various patterns of role interactions. As pre-school children are willing to join a play and simulate scenarios from their everyday life, adolescents also eagerly emerge into a play or play-like situations, however, in contrast with pre-school children, they are not interested in simulating social relations, but in **modelling** them. Spaces of adolescent interaction represent a kind of “training platforms”, where adolescents can experiment with roles and images. In this context the system of social roles can be regarded as the “**ideal, developed**” form, and the process of interaction with this form can create the zone of proximal development at this age period.

Research on experimenting with roles in adolescence: challenges and perspectives

In the past 10 years the author of this article has focused on the issue of adolescents and young adults experimenting with roles in various socio-cultural contexts. In 2012 the thesis “Overcoming the inner role conflict in late adolescence by means of role play” was defended. The empirical data, presented in the thesis, demonstrated that specially organized educational games, which offer the possibility of experimenting with various types of roles, represent an efficient means of resolving inner conflicts and contradictions, which contributes to adolescents’ development and successful overcoming of the critical period [19].

In 2012–2014 in the framework of the international research project «Global Perspectives on Learning and Development with Digital Video-Editing Media: A Qualitative Inquiry in Everyday Lives of Marginalized Young People⁵», a research group from Moscow State University of Psychology and Education studied peculiarities of experimenting with roles in the learning process, mediated by digital technologies. On the example of a student with special educational needs, who was shooting an autobiographical film as a part of his graduation exam, the participants of the research group managed to demonstrate that experimenting with roles can contribute to the development of reflection [29].

⁵ The project was supported by Marie Curie International Research Staff Exchange Scheme Fellowship within the 7th European Community Framework Program (Project № 318909). More information about the project is available at <https://digitmed.wordpress.com/>

In 2015 in the framework of a research project «Being Other: the Effectiveness of Arts-based Approaches in Engaging with Disaffected Young People», organized by the Department of Education of Oxford University, UK⁶ the research group could observe the effects of applying various arts-based approaches including drama and role play games on disaffected and vulnerable adolescents and young adults. The research demonstrated, that experimenting with roles contributes to the development of communicative and reflective abilities, as well as helps adolescents to socialize and motivates them to study [26].

In 2015–2018 a series of research on experimenting with roles in virtual spaces — particularly, in social networks and videogames — was conducted by Moscow State University of Psychology and Education. The data obtained, demonstrates that on-line behaviors are closely connected with adolescents' personal characteristics (including inner contradictions, discrepancies between “real” and “ideal” self etc.) and that adolescents as well as young adults often use virtual spaces for various experiments with roles and identities [8], [21].

In 2019 a research project “Media-theatre” for adolescents was launched by Moscow State University of Psychology and Education in collaboration with School #1564 (Moscow, Russia)⁷. The project aims at elaborating an innovative model of a drama-based joint learning activity, designed for educating, socializing and developing adolescents in the framework of the Cultural-Historical tradition.

The empirical data, collected in this 10-year period, testifies, that experimenting with roles has an outstand-

ing potential in the context of adolescent development and education. There are strong grounds to believe that specially organized cultural spaces, where adolescents could experiment with roles, may become an efficient developmental and educational resource. However, so far, the research on this issue remains scarce and the number of works, focusing on the phenomenon of experimenting with roles, is still rather limited.

Some concluding remarks

Summarizing what has been said, we can conclude, that rejecting a purely sociological understanding of role and considering this phenomenon from L.S. Vygotsky's point of view, gives a new perspective on the issue of development in adolescence. Indicating inclusion into the system of social roles as an essential task of adolescence allows to regard social roles as a kind of “ideal form” of this age period. The interaction with the ideal form takes place in the situation of experimenting with roles, which can be defined as a system of activities, connected with “trying on” different patterns of role behavior. Experimenting with roles takes different forms and may be performed both in real and virtual environment. At the same time virtual spaces may be more attractive for contemporary adolescents, as in reality they do not often find adequate conditions for this experimenting. From this point of view further theoretical and empirical research on the issue of role development is needed.

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Современное подростничество в фокусе культурно-исторической психологии: к проблеме ролевого экспериментирования

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В статье рассматриваются основные представления о подростковом возрасте, сложившиеся в традиции культурно-исторической научной школы. Обсуждается, какие психологические новообразования, социальная ситуация развития и ведущая деятельность выделяются для данного возрастного периода. Выдвигается идея о том, что противоречия, существующие между представителями культурно-исторической теории в определении содержания развития в подростковом возрасте, обусловлены отсутствием единого представления об «идеальной форме» данного периода детства. В статье обсуждается мало известная работа Л.С. Выготского «Конкретная психология человека», в которой основатель культурно-исторической теории указывает на проблему социальных ролей и на важность их изучения в контексте подросткового возраста. Л.С. Выготский рассматривал роль как ключевой механизм, отвечающий за регуляцию высших психических функций в различных социальных взаимодействиях. В связи с рядом причин — в первую очередь, исторических — понятие роли долгое время практически не разрабатывалось отечественными психологами. В статье предпринята попытка привлечь внимание к проблеме ролевого развития в подростковом возрасте — в

частности, рассмотреть феномен ролевого экспериментирования как специфическую систему деятельностей, свойственных современным подросткам.

Ключевые слова: подростничество, психологический возраст, новообразования, социальная ситуация развития, ведущая деятельность, драма, идеальная форма, социальная роль, ролевое экспериментирование, ролевое развитие.

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