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The "Whole Person" Challenge: Addressing Conundrums of Systemic-Holistic Approaches to Human Development

Anna Stetsenko[1]
[1]*The City University of New York, New York, NY, United States*

Abstract: In this paper, I explore two interrelated topics that are critically important to studying human development: first, the principle of a *systemic-holistic approach* and, second, the challenge of understanding *the whole person*. In his paper on pedology, Vygotsky sets to articulate these topics, facing many challenges along the way. Both aspects are also central to a set of recently popular Relational Developmental Systems Theories (RDST). I discuss how these recent theories, despite important advances, still face the same challenges as did Vygotsky almost a hundred years ago, with a tendency to offer *aggregative/ composite* solutions focused on multiple individual attributes and levels of human ecologies. This tendency appears to be in sync with the goal to achieve some "full" understandings of human development, as motivated by a positivist and de facto colonial (eurocentric) scientistic ethos, which essentializes phenomena such as the "whole person" as fixed, objective things "out there," thus neglecting researchers' engagement with them. Consequently, the concept of the whole person remains ever elusive. What is missing is an account of a person *as an actor/agent of a shared communal life, or productive self- and community-making,* and a protagonist in an integral, non-additive *unique life project/ agenda* that is inextricably a part of the shared communal existence. The proposed alternative, from an activist-trans/formative methodology (with roots in Marxist-Vygotskian ideas), is to consider the whole person as an artifact contingent on, and consubstantial with, particular living functionalities/goals/tasks within ongoing *self-and-world/other co-realizing* productive practices, including understanding and research.

Keywords: Vygotsky, Relational Psychology, Cultural-Historical Psychology.

O Desafio da "Pessoa Integral": Enfrentando os Obstáculos das Abordagens Sistêmico-Holísticas para o Desenvolvimento Humano

Resumo: Neste artigo, exploro dois tópicos inter-relacionados, extremamente importantes para o estudo do desenvolvimento humano – o princípio de uma *abordagem sistêmico-holística* e o desafio de compreender *a pessoa como um todo*. Em sua pedologia, Vigotski se propõe a articular esses tópicos, que também são centrais para um conjunto de Teorias de Sistemas Relacionais do Desenvolvimento (TSDR), popularizadas recentemente. Discuto como essas teorias recentes, a despeito de realizarem importantes avanços, ainda enfrentam os mesmos desafios de Vigotski, com uma tendência a oferecer soluções *agregativas/compostas* focadas em múltiplos atributos individuais e níveis de ecologias humanas. Essa tendência parece sintonizada com a busca por uma compreensão "plena" do desenvolvimento humano, motivada por um *ethos* cientificista positivista e, de fato, colonial (eurocêntrico). Esse *ethos* essencializa fenômenos como a "pessoa como um todo" como coisas fixas e objetivas "lá fora", negligenciando, assim, o engajamento dos pesquisadores com elas. O resultado é que o conceito de pessoa como um todo permanece sempre impreciso. Falta o relato de uma pessoa como ator/agente de uma vida comunitária

compartilhada, ou de uma construção produtiva de si e da comunidade, e protagonista de um *projeto/agenda de vida único*, integral e não aditivo, que é inextricavelmente parte da existência comunitária. A alternativa proposta, a partir de uma metodologia ativista-trans/formadora (com raízes em ideias marxistas-vigotskianas), é considerar a pessoa como um todo como um artefato contingente a, e consubstancial com, funcionalidades/objetivos/tarefas vitais específicas, dentro de práticas produtivas contínuas de *correalização de si e do mundo/outro*, incluindo compreensão e pesquisa.

Palavras-chave: Vigotski, Psicologia Relacional, Psicologia Histórico-Cultural.

El Desafío de la "Persona Integral": Abordando los Obstáculos de los Enfoques Sistémico-Holísticos del Desarrollo Humano

Resumen: En este artículo, exploro dos temas interrelacionados y cruciales para el estudio del desarrollo humano: el principio de un *enfoque sistémico-holístico* y el desafío de comprender a *la persona en su totalidad*. En su pedología, Vigotski propone articular estos temas, que son también centrales para un conjunto de teorías de sistemas de desarrollo relacional (TSDR) recientemente populares. Analizo cómo estas teorías recientes enfrentan desafíos similares a los de Vigotski y que, a pesar de lograr avances importantes, suelen ofrecer soluciones *agregativas/compuestas* centradas en múltiples atributos individuales y niveles de ecologías humanas. Esta tendencia parece estar en sintonía con el esfuerzo por lograr una comprensión "integral" del desarrollo humano, motivada por un ethos positivista y, en efecto, colonial (eurocéntrico). Este *ethos* esencializa fenómenos como la "persona en su totalidad" como cosas fijas y objetivas "ahí afuera", descuidando así el compromiso de los investigadores con ellos. Como resultado, el concepto de persona integral sigue elusivo. Se echa en falta una explicación de la persona *como actor/agente de una vida comunitaria compartida* o de la construcción productiva de sí mismo y de la comunidad, y como protagonista de un *proyecto/agenda vital único*, integral y no aditivo, que forma parte inextricablemente de la existencia comunitaria compartida. La alternativa propuesta, desde una metodología activista-trans/formativa (con raíces en las ideas marxistas-vigotskianas), consiste en considerar a la persona integral como un artefacto contingente y consustancial a funciones/objetivos/tareas vitales particulares, dentro de prácticas productivas continuas de *corealización del yo y del mundo/otro*, que incluyen la comprensión y la investigación.

Palabras clave: Vigotski, Psicología Relacional, Psicología Histórico-Cultural.

Introduction

In his paper *Pedology and Psychotechnics* (1930/2010), Vygotsky strives to formulate systemic principles of human development from a holistic perspective, that is, by approaching the person (child) *as a whole*. His intention is to develop general (even universal) principles of how children develop at each particular age. Vygotsky's expectation is that pedology—the study of the child—can be charged with the task of developing these principles, since pedology can and should be, according to him, the science of "child development *on the whole*" and of its characteristics that pertain to "child development as such" (these expressions are used throughout his paper). Vygotsky taps into topics of the systemic-holistic approach in ways that resonate with contemporary works on them. But his arguments are marred by naturalistic attitudes—as he hails the "scientific impartiality" and "objectivity" of a scientific method (Vygotsky, 1930/2010, p. 117) and speaks of "objective reality, reality of the object of study and objectively real relation of this object with the objects

of other disciplines" (p. 109), suggesting the goal of studying a "natural whole" (p. 115) represented by a developing child. This goes against the very gist of Vygotsky's otherwise post-empiricist and post-positivist methodology and his philosophy of method as developed in his other works (Vygotsky, 1987; for analysis, see Stetsenko, 2016; 2017; 2020a; 2023).

Indeed, Vygotsky's overall approach provided much needed solutions for overcoming the limits not only of classical experimental paradigms but of the whole descriptivist methodology with its contemplative stance of studying things "as they are." Such aspirations are impossible from the Marxist-Vygotskian perspective given the notion that knowledge not only explains, interprets, or represents the world but actively participates in changing it (Marx, 1845/1978). I will return to this point later in this paper.

Yet, in his *Pedology* paper, Vygotsky appeals to an abstract notion tailored to the whole child as an objective reality. Rather than dwell on details of Vygotsky's paper (given that he himself, apparently, moved beyond many of its postulates in his other works), I will explore two related topics that are critically important to studying human development: 1) the principle of a *systemic-holistic approach* as it is closely associated with 2) the challenge of understanding *the whole person*. Both of these interrelated points are raised in Vygotsky's paper on pedology as he sets to articulate them, facing many challenges along the way. These two topics are also relevant to current research on human development across a wide range of approaches; they are especially central to a set of Relational Developmental Systems theories (RDST), presently gaining in popularity within psychology and beyond. I intend to show that these recent theories still face the same conundrums as did Vygotsky almost a hundred years ago. After outlining these theories, I point out a tendency in many frameworks striving to be systemic-holistic to offer *aggregative* or *composite* (if not additive) solutions that focus on multiple attributes of the individual and multiple levels of human ecology. That is, I argue that these theories provide a *de facto* aggregation of various aspects of human development and its ecologies rather than their *selective integration* required, in my view, for a systemic-holistic perspective. This appears to be in sync with the general aspiration to achieve some putatively "full" understanding of human development by covering an ever-growing array of "objective" dimensions and facets of the organism and its ecologies—all motivated by an impossible positivist scientistic ethos of (pseudo-) objectivity.

This trend manifests itself in bio-socio-cultural-historical and other, similarly composite/aggregative, perspectives. Consequently, the concept of the whole person remains ever elusive. What is missing, specifically, is an account of *a person as an actor/agent of a shared communal life, or productive life-making* (i.e., social praxis), that is, a protagonist in an integral, unified, non-divisible, and non-additive *unique life project/agenda that is inextricably a part of the shared communal existence*. I elaborate on how this conceptualization is not some abstract, neutral, universal principle produced and meant to operate within a vacuum. Instead, it is a (dual) artifact contingent on, operational within, and consubstantial with, particular living functionalities (goals and tasks) within productive (material-discursive) communal practices of being-knowing-doing, including understanding and research. In other words, systemic-holistic understandings are contingent on specific research tasks and goals that are tailored to particular dimensions of living—those of people being indivisible and individually unique, though also profoundly social, agents of a communal world- and self-in-the-making with indispensable roles to play in this process.

I elaborate this approach as one of the steps away from objectivist understandings that are focused on some "natural" reality as "it is" and that exclude researchers from what they study, theorize and, ultimately, aspire to change. This elaboration also intends to shift away from the perspective of westernized modernity that is "limited and exhausted in its *pretended universality* [emphasis added]" (Escobar, 2007, p. 189).

Relational Developmental Systems Theories – An Overview

The most prominent line of work in developing systemic-holistic views is recently advancing in one version of a developmental systems theoretical model—Relational Developmental Systems Theories (RDST). This line of work currently occupies quite a prominent place in developmental psychology and

adjacent fields. For example, Lerner and Overton (2008) claim that

> Today, the cutting edge of the study of the human life span is framed by a developmental systems theoretical model, one that is informed by a postpositivist, relational metatheory that moves beyond classical Cartesian dichotomies, "avoids all splits," and transforms fundamental antinomies into co-equal and indissociable complementarities (p. 245).

RDST are linked to the "general systems" approach and associated ideas of part-whole relations, holism, emergence, and self-organization (Witherington, 2007). It is often attributed to von Bertalanffy, but many other scholars have also contributed to its consolidation by the mid-twentieth century (Stetsenko, 2017). Recent important works within this approach include those by Overton, Lerner, Mueller, and their colleagues (Lerner & Overton, 2008; Overton, 2015; Overton & Mueller, 2012).

In an influential line of work, Overton compares and contrasts the classic Cartesian-Split-Mechanistic research paradigm with the process-relational and relational-developmental systems research paradigm. In his argument, the advantage of a systemic-holistic approach is that it "treats endogenous activity, change, becoming, process, necessary organization, and relations as fundamental categories in constructing relational developmental systems theories and research methods" (Overton & Molenaar, 2015, pp. 3-4). Positive aspects of RDST include their thrust and useful heuristics to overcome pernicious forms of reductionism (including brainism—a tendency to reduce mental processes to the brain "chemistry;" Arievitch, 2017), still powerfully present in mainstream accounts. However, there are other ways to advance this cluster of theories, including from the perspective developed in Vygotsky's project[1] and in dialogue with it. So far, such a dialogue has been missing, with Vygotsky's project marginalized in RDST. The unfortunate placement of Vygotsky's theory within what Overton (2006) described as "the Marxist split tradition" might have played a role in sidelining this theory; mirroring this trend, scholars in Vygotsky's tradition do not often engage with developments in RDST (exceptions include Bidell, 1999; 2020; Karimi-Aghdam, 2016; Stetsenko, 2008; 2009; 2017; 2019). The resulting lack of dialogue and collaboration among scholars interested in broad theories and worldviews that are commensurate with the complexities of human development in a multidimensional and rapidly changing world is an obstacle to developing strong alternatives to the still dominant mechanistic and reductionist mainstream views.

This possible dialogue concerns specifically the meanings attributed to *systemic-holistic* principles of development and the related notion of *whole person*. Systemic approach and holism hold several meanings, with both related to notions of "the whole-part" in the RDST. Indeed, Overton (2015) pays much attention to these notions, writing that

> A whole, unity, or system is a relational set of processes, such that the whole determines the nature of the part processes and the part processes determine the nature of the unity. The unity exhibits systemic qualities that are different than any single part process or the sum of the part processes. Thus, these systemic qualities are emergent novelties (p. 37).

This appears to be a non-additive account in a particular sense—namely, focusing on the whole not being the same as the sum of its parts, which is indeed an important heuristic for many purposes in analyzing human development. Yet note how the description is closely tailored to the language of parts, elements and wholes: "The whole is not an aggregate of discrete elements, but an organized system of parts, each part being defined by its relations to other parts and to the whole" (Overton, 2015, p. 28) whereby "the whole is not decomposable into elements arranged in additive sequences of mechanistic cause–effect relations"

[1] "Vygotsky's project" is used here to denote the research school developed by L. S. Vygotsky, A. N. Leontiev, and A. R. Luria (and their immediate co-workers Zaporozhets, Bozhovich, Levina, Morozova, Slavina, and Elkonin) starting in the 1920s all into the 1970s in Moscow. In doing so, I follow the long-established tradition in Soviet/Russian psychology to emphasize the collaborative nature of Vygotsky's research and indicate a core unity of ideas (albeit not without internal contradictions and conflicts) in its members' works. A number of Moscow scholars in later years can also be seen as belonging to the same project/school of thought—especially, V. V. Davydov, V. P. Zinchenko and A. A. Leontiev, among others (I also count my works as its continuation).

(Overton, 2015, p. 40). Thus, the wholes are not composed of elements in additive sequences, yet it is *elements and parts*—and how they are organized into wholes—that are central in this approach. The very language of "parts" and "elements" (and also often "components") evokes composite connotations, of something/things being composed of parts if even in a non-additive way. This is in contrast to the language of, for example, dimensions, patterns, layers, trajectories, and facets of ongoing, continuous, and uninterrupted processes. The prevalence of this kind of parts/elements-wholes descriptions is perhaps not surprising given that the general system theory approaches have come from physics, biology, and other natural sciences, with powerful influences coming also from cybernetics and informatics. It is also no accident that the most often cited examples of (self-organizing) systems include phenomena such as hurricanes and chemical reactions in which varied wholes result from the mixing of basic elements, with an increasingly complex whole emerging from interactions between components.

In this light, we can discern a certain tension in RDST as developed by Overton and colleagues and currently widely accepted in the field. On the one hand, Overton (2015) speaks of the "inherent activity of nature" (p. 39), with all of life denoting "a comprehensive activity, in which organism and environment are included" (Dewey, 1925/1958, p. 9, as cited in Overton, 2015, p. 32). Overton (2015), further, insists on "a characterization of the organism as an *inherently active, self-creating (autopoetic, enactive), self-organizing, and self-regulating, relatively plastic, nonlinear complex adaptive system*" (p. 47). On the other, one of the core assumptions is that "although this is a worldview representing all of nature, we can simplify for present purposes by using *the living organism as our primary model* [emphasis added]" (Overton, 2015, p. 28).

This conceptual step of moving from the "inherent activity of nature" to the organism (the latter, again, evoking static and naturalistic connotations) is, surprisingly, not elaborated in detail. Even more critically, this step is also not directly connected to addressing the *functionalities and life tasks—life activities—of the living organism*. The living organism appears close to being a "thing," an entity (a whole composed of parts) that is more static than would be the case if considered as constituted by its dynamic exchanges with the world, such as in the process of actively interchanging with it. This latter type of analysis would critically focus on activities and interactivities of the organism in and with the world, with various levels of organization of these activities (softly) determined by specific tasks and goals of life (as elaborated in the next section).

This tension is present in debates between RDST and a variant of dynamic systems approach developed by Thelen and Smith (2006), the latter being, incidentally, much more compatible with Vygotsky's project than Overton's. As Overton remarks (2015), Thelen and Smith deny the ontological status of structure since structure is itself generated by the activity entailed in the process of self-organization, thus opening this variant of dynamic systems to some sort of reductionism. The alternative solution by Overton (2015, drawing on Piaget) is that structures function and functions have structure. Yet, in many instances in Overton's and colleagues' works, structure does come across as separable from function—rather than, as in a Vygotskyan and Thelen's approaches, *structure itself being a certain way (more or less durable across contexts) of organizing functions*. The latter view avoids *the passivity assumption* (Arievitch, 2017) and highlights organisms' ineluctable mode of existence—the active interchange with the world—as the core ontological assumption.

Here the devil is truly in the details. There is a lot of discussion of coating, activity, process, and enactment in RDST, yet, in the final analysis, it appears that the discussion of the whole is focused on entities and elements more than on processes and activities, or living functionalities. Consider the *core example* for a systemic-holistic approach—that of vision—that Overton (2015) provides. In writing of vision, his focus is clearly on parts/elements of the visual system—"cornea, pupil, iris, lens, retina, optic nerve, lateral geniculate nucleus, optic radiation, primary visual cortex, and associative visual cortex" (p. 37). The core argument is that "vision does not reside in any of the part processes, nor is vision found in the aggregate sum of the parts. Vision is an emergent function of the whole organization; the pattern of coacting part processes." In other words, the coacting is emphasized yet, given the list of anatomical parts, coacting clearly relates to the *parts* involved. In describing the vision there is no discussion, nor even a mention, of any activity/living functionality

by the organism (let alone the person). That is, vision is described to be consisting of coacting parts—but not of the person coacting with the environment. This is in a startling difference with the long-standing and truly cutting edge, groundbreaking scholarship on vision (e.g., works of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, James and Eleanor Gibson, Ulrich Neisser, Tim Ingold, Alva Noe, among others) that specifically highlights activities that in fact go into vision—into *the faculty and activity of seeing*. The latter view is well expressed by Ingold: "instead of thinking of perception [vision] as the computational activity of a mind within a body we should think of it as the exploratory activity of the whole organism within its environmental setting in active participation through practical bodily engagement. As such it does not yield images or representations. It rather guides the organism along in the furtherance of its project" (Ingold, 2011, p. 260).

Overall, although RDST speak of relations between individuals and their contexts, the core focus remains on the summative aggregation (i.e., on clusters of things that have come or been brought together) of multiple attributes of the individual (e.g., physiological, cognitive, emotional, motivational) and multiple levels of the human ecology, from the biological through the sociocultural and historical ones (Lerner, 2006). In a similar aggregative approach, Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, and Rose (2020) suggest: "development is a constructive enterprise shaped by ongoing, reciprocal interactions between children's biology, their developing brains, and their physical and social contexts, with the latter playing a defining role" (pp. 6-7). Given this focus, it is no wonder that Bronfenbrenner (who is often recruited as a RDST ally) actually became bitterly disenchanted with "the wayward course" in developmental research which, according to him, wavers between the poles of either too much research on development "out of context" or, alternatively, on "context without development" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 795).

As to the notion of the whole, as related to the systemic-holistic principles, Overton's (2015) approach is apparently developed to describe the whole of nature/universe/life, all that can be said to exist—with all its events, phenomena, processes and acts considered all together, as a whole— all in a state of being related, and thus in need of a systemic and holistic description, in *toto*, as taken together in unity, with all diversity accounted for. Indeed, Overton speaks of "the full concrete happenings of nature" (Whitehead, as cited in Overton, 2015, p. 12) as that from which every science is an abstraction. What this grand (in its aspirations) approach lacks is a detailed specification of the mode of analysis itself. For example, what are the levels of analysis and, specifically, what are the tasks/goals for each particular level? What kind of phenomena are of interest? And if all phenomena and levels of analysis are equally of interest then *why* is this type of analysis of interest?

Overton's works do develop the idea of *lines of sight*; however, the same critique as in the vision example above is also applicable to this notion. Namely, the lack of focus on action and activity in both the *vision* example and the *lines of sight* notion (note the parallel focus on vision/sight) renders them contemplative and passive. What is missing is a goal-directed, purposeful activity of engaging with goals and tasks at the level of both activities of persons generally and those of researchers who study human development. In other words, what remains undertheorized in RDST is the question about the specifics and the particular, *distinctive features* of various viewpoints such as, importantly, the one concerning the whole person. What exactly is each of these viewpoints and how are they defined vis-à-vis each other and in regards to other possible viewpoints? Even more critically, what are multiple viewpoints and how multiple do they need to be to be sufficient? Who decides how many are needed and when they are sufficient? The crux of the matter is this: insisting that viewpoints de facto "create" an object of inquiry, as Overton (2015) does, requires a close and targeted analysis exactly of each of these diverse viewpoints, not to mention a close and targeted analysis of the very notion of the viewpoint and its role in theorizing and research.

Ultimately, Overton suggests that an object of inquiry has been created by, and "will be fully understood only through, multiple viewpoints. More generally, *the unity that constitutes nature, the organism, and development becomes discovered only in the diversity of multiple interrelated lines of sight*" (Overton, 2015, p. 43). Note how such a claim posits without much, if any, problematization some sort of "full" knowledge/understanding, which therefore (one has to assume, given the weight of the notion "full") also is universal, timeless, ahistorical, all-embracing, total and final, and thus *de facto*

totalizing. This form of knowledge, full knowledge, is ostensibly above other (as can be logically imputed) partial, local, historized, and contextualized forms of knowledge/understanding.

This is highly problematic, if not downright objectionable, especially in light of developments of the past (at least) hundred years in both sciences and philosophy, and in fields that bring them together—the philosophy of science and the science studies. Indeed, most scientific advances of the last century point to the impossibility of any full, total, or final knowledge and understanding. To assume otherwise, arguably, is a remnant of an objectivist (scientistic) view of science in which understanding is assumed to be achievable by means of representing the world "as it is," in its putative fullness (totality), as something stable and therefore, in some pristine state, supposedly dissociated from the processes of achieving knowledge and understanding, unless some "supreme knower" in charge of everything in the universe is posited. Developments in hermeneutics, phenomenology, pragmatism, postmodernism, social constructivism and constructionism, ecological approaches, feminist standpoint epistemology, actor-network theory, new materialism and, importantly, in decolonial perspectives especially by scholars of color, those from the Global South and Indigenous scholars, among others, have advanced understandings that all knowledge contains uncertainty, unpredictability, ambiguity, and unfinalizability, making full understanding of anything theoretically unattainable, practically impossible, and morally, ethically and politically undesirable (if not toxic).

And yet, this emphasis on "full understanding" is what appears to drive researchers to apply strategies that combine as many attributes as possible, both internal ones (including brain processes, genetics) and external ones (various measures of context). An implicit goal of these approaches apparently is to cover, and account for, everything that potentially plays out in human development. In fact, the leading trend has been to attempt such an understanding by combining various viewpoints, such as in bio-psycho-socio-cultural (Diaz-Loving, 2002) and bio-socio-cultural-ecological systems (Cole, 2000), as well as bioecological (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) and bio-cultural-historical approaches (Cole & Packer, 2016). The prevalence of these attempts reveals an unwarranted belief that the more dimensions of human development and its ecologies are addressed at once, together, the better and more "fully" we understand them. This is often done in disregard of conceptual, epistemological, methodological, and practical conundrums involved in bringing together, often indiscriminately and randomly, disparate areas of research, for example, on brain and human evolution, on the one hand and on classroom dynamics along with other issues of pedagogy and education, on the other. Such line of works, arguably, is reflective of falling prey to a scientistic ideal of a "total" (sometimes dubbed, misleadingly, "whole") understanding of various phenomena and processes. This is combined, further and with quite harmful effects, with other scientistic ideals of anchoring research in natural sciences—for example, appealing to the proclaimed authority of brain research (which is actually in its infancy, or adolescence at best, according to brain researchers themselves, see Miller, 2008) with their proclaimed (though actually impossible and unachievable) objectivity, neutrality, finality, and certainty.

The implications from this version of dynamic systems theory for a whole person concept are equally composite/aggregative. For example, drawing on RDST (see Cantor, Lerner, Pittman, Chase, & Gomperts, 2021), Cantor (2021) suggests the dynamic concept of *whole-child development*. The very first recommendation (supplied by the author to the American Federation of Teachers) to work in line with this concept is to "be attuned to the presence of biological, psychological, and sociocultural attributes of each child" (p. 22). Note: attuned not to the child, but to the child's attributes! Further, in this approach, human development "results from both nature and nurture. More specifically, it results from each person's biology, developing brain and body, psychology (social, emotional, and cognitive development), and gene expression, and from each person's parental, familial, educational, communal, environmental, cultural, and societal influences" (Cantor, 2021, p. 15). Note how nature and nurture are disconnected in this argument, as if these are two different realms (for counterarguments from a Vygotskian standpoint, see Stetsenko, 2017; 2018). Note also the listing of various fragmented attributes of the human being and human ecology. Thus, the principle of holism is reduced to an aggregate of various factors, influences, effects and so on. Cantor (2021) also mentions that

"The contexts and relationships they [children] are exposed to are the primary drivers of who they become and of the expressions of their genes" (p. 17). Yet this is not coordinated at all with the previous aggregative statements. Besides, this last statement reveals that this approach is only about what children are exposed to, how they are situated in the world/context, and what they are influenced/affected by. What is missing is the child herself—as an actor and agent of one's own development, let alone an actor and agent of the world at large.

Constructive Alternatives and Openings for a Dialogue

From the above discussion, critically focused on gaps and inconsistencies in RDST (leaving aside, for a lack of space, their strengths, discussed earlier in Stetsenko, 2009; 2019; 2017), one can infer several constructive suggestions for future developments including in dialogues with Vygotsky's project.

First and foremost, as regards the meaning of the systemic-holistic approach, the works in Vygotsky's project focus on living functionalities of human development rather than on the elements/parts-wholes approach. As discussed at length in Stetsenko (2008; 2017; 2019), the core thrust in Vygotsky's own works and those of his followers was to challenge the central essentialist premise about "thing-like" entities that exist separately from each other and the rest of the world. This project's alternative proposal was to regard human development as a process in the realm of relations and trans/inter/intra/actions—that is, as embedded, situated, distributed, and co-constructed within contexts and intrinsically interwoven with them. The most important achievement across a broad range of works in Vygotsky's tradition of recent years (see especially Rogoff, 2003; 2016; Lave, 1988) has been in advancing this particular mode of thinking that overcomes the Cartesian split between the object and the subject, the person and the world, the knower and the known—to offer instead a radically different *relational* (or *transactional*, see Altman & Rogoff, 1987) *ontology*. The thrust of this ontology/worldview is that the reductionist metaphor of separation is replaced with the "*dialectical metaphor of participation*" (Bidell, 1999, p. 307) and, moreover, contribution (Stetsenko, 2008; 2012; 2017; 2023).

Further, the Vygotskian approach, no less importantly, posits *human activity*—active bi-directional engagement with the world—as being constitutive of the relations between persons and the world and thus, as *ontologically basic*. This assumption has extraordinary implications for understanding human development, shifting away from passive accounts with their focus on "co-being" as something that comes about through "co-presence," whereby existence is fundamentally inert and passive. In place of "co-being," human development is portrayed as a process composed of active life-relations in a holistic life-world—with these processes being neither "out there" in the world, nor "in here" inside the person but instead at the intersection between, or the nexus of, the two.

As especially elaborated by A. N. Leontiev (1978) on this topic (see also works of N.N. Bernstein, 1967, for important insights), it is *living functionalities*—goals and tasks of activities—that shape human development by guiding particular dynamically integrated constellations of active life-relations (dynamic or functional systems). Note that this is not just person-person or subject-object relations (as in inter-activist approaches); rather, this is about the core mode of existence—an active, dynamic flow of transactions that encompasses and ontologically co-constitutes all the dimensions and layers within this process, in canceling the very separation of persons and the world (cf. Barad, 2007, on 'intra-action' referring to the ontological inseparability as contrasted with 'inter-action' relating to individuated entities that interact yet remain ontologically separate).

Second, Vygotsky's works are adamantly against naturalistic understandings of human development (typically, with unfortunate connotations of social Darwinism, see Stetsenko, 2011). This is consonant with Sylvia Wynter's (2001; 2003) critique of approaches that define humans biocentrically *on the model of a natural organism*. According to Wynter, such a model has to do, at its core, with "the overall devalorization of the human species that is indispensable to the encoding of our present hegemonic Western-bourgeois biocentric descriptive statement of the human" (Wynter, 2006, p. 119). Wynter follows Fanon who called into question "our present culture's purely biological definition of what it is to be, and therefore of what it is like to be, human" (Wynter, 2001, p. 31).

Although there is no place to discuss this point in detail, it is worth mentioning that many scholars working with the relational perspective have also emphasized the need to turn away from biologizing human development, and rendering it passive, to focus instead on activity and active engagement with the world. For example, Merleau-Ponty (1966) wrote that "the use a man [sic] is to make of his body is transcendent in relation to that body as a mere biological entity" (p. 189).

Third, Vygotsky paid much attention to methodology for a systemic-holistic approach—especially in terms of *levels and units of analysis*. What transpires in his works (in reading across their corpus) is the relative independence of various levels of analysis (with their base unity acknowledged as the background premise, yet focusing on how specific sciences and research directions/tasks "construct" their objects of study). For example, Vygotsky (1987, p. 244) wrote: "To say that water consists of hydrogen and oxygen is *to say nothing that relates to water* generally. . . It is to say nothing that relates to the great oceans and to a drop of rain, to water's capacity to extinguish fire and to Archimedes' law." To continue with the water-related topic, the study of oceans, for example in biological oceanography, attends to the ocean's plants and animals and their interactions with the marine environment, while the study of the oceanic water's chemical composition is *not* relevant to this level of analysis and is not determined by it *at all*.

This is about carefully discriminating among specific dynamic systems operating at particular levels of complexity, each with their own dynamics, paths, patterns, and regularities, all driven by specific living functionalities. Within both the philosophy of science and scientific disciplines like theoretical physics and theoretical biology, the idea that each discipline operates at a particular level of analysis, relatively independently, has been widely discussed (see Cat, 2023, for an overview). Yet, such topics are practically ignored in psychology and related fields (Deci & Ryan, 2011), resulting in a profound confusion as to the core subject matter in studying human development. Indeed, psychology remains "deeply divided over what its objects of study are and how one should go about studying them" (Parker, 2011, p. 471).

In my take on this topic, this is about the level and the unit of analysis as anchoring any and all understandings—which presupposes that the workings of knowledge production are meshed with the very reality of what is being understood. For example, the levels of analysis are important in that they clarify *non-overlapping* explanations and hypotheses. This co-anchoring (enmeshment) of the subject matter within inquiries and research is a direct rejection of the sweeping metaphysical aspiration for an unspecified, blanket understanding from multiple viewpoints at once, that is, from an unspecified, overly generalized, and lofty aspiration to achieve the impossible goal of a "full" understanding. This critique actually appears to be in sync with Overton (2015), acknowledging that the *viewpoints are central* to all inquiries and theorizing (yet this remains rather speculative in RDST, leaving space for spectatorship connotations).

The broad philosophical position at play here is that understanding the world is inseparable from the world itself, until we ourselves make that separation—an inevitable and legitimate step in any research which, however, needs careful consideration and articulation. This position, though still marginalized, in fact goes back to William James (1992) who wrote when he writes that "the knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he [sic] registers the truth which he helps to create" (p. 908). In my articulation of *activist trans/formative methodology* (Stetsenko, 2023), I build on Vygotsky's (1997a) notion that methods and objects of investigations are always intimately linked, whereby they are not ontologically separate but instead, indivisibly merged. In my interpretation, this stance implies that methodological tools, strategies, and techniques have to be tailored to, and result, not in the uncovering of facts "as they are" at the present moment, within the givenness of the status quo. Rather, research is about intervening with and co-constructing phenomena and processes under investigation in non-neutral, historically determinate ways in line with ontological, epistemological, and ideological/ethical commitments and goals that researchers deem worthy and take on as guides for action (hence the notion of ethico-ontoepistemology, see Stetsenko, 2020a; 2021; 2023). Instead of copying (mirroring) reality and striving to disclose it "as it is," as faithfully as possible, this methodology calls for actively and intentionally creating conditions to co-construct the very processes and phenomena

under investigation to study them *in the acts of co-construction*. This idea expands on Vygotsky's seemingly paradoxical argument that "the strength of the experiment is in its artificiality" (1997b, p. 320).

This alternative position, based on the points as discussed herein and rooted in Vygotsky's project, has many overlaps with the topic of the whole person approach, as discussed below.

The Whole Person Challenge

As Vygotsky stated, "the biological and the cultural—both in pathology and norm—have turned out to be heterogenous, distinctive, specific forms of development that do not co-exist next to each other nor one above another and are not mechanically linked to each other, but instead are fused together into a higher synthesis, complex, though still unified" (Vygotsky, 1997a, p. 26). What kind of *a higher synthesis* is Vygotsky writing about? This question has not been sufficiently addressed in previous works within his project.

My suggestion, in the spirit of advancing Vygotsky's project, is that it concerns the notion of *each individual's unique life* being a unit and level of analysis adequate to addressing the topic of the whole person (note that "unit," sharing much with "entity," "component," and the like is more static than "level," thus warranting much caution in its use). More specifically, this is about a living and breathing process of "doing life" by each person not as an organism/body but as a member of human communities, and while *mattering* in the practices of these communities, across time/space and through history.

At the core in this approach is the effort to conceptualize people/ourselves as *who we are, not what we are* (as expressed by Greene, 1998, drawing on Arendt). In placing emphasis on the self and individual life, this approach is resolutely non-individualist. This is because the initial basic premises—about self/personhood and the world—are radically reworked away from traditional western canons, in the spirit of approaches that "promote new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of the kind of individuality which has been imposed on us" (Foucault as cited in Sadoval, 2000, p. 164.4).

In my view, what needs articulation as the core of Vygotsky's works is a unique *productive communality* of human development, with a focus on shared communal practice as "living/becoming-with" in the sense of co-belonging, consociality, co-participation (*soprichastnost*), and intercommunalism (drawing on authors like Bakhtin, Levine, Nancy, Lorde, Anzaldúa, Langston Hughes, and Indigenous perspectives, among others). Note that my efforts to further advance this position have focused on problematizing the notion of community practice to stand for communal life-making as a flow of collective/communal activities composed of individual contributions to them (see Stetsenko, 2008; 2017; 2020b; 2023). In this conceptual move, reality itself is in a constant making as an *act*uality (etymologically linked to *acting*), that is, our active engagement/participation in, and contribution to, dense networks of joint communal practices. As such, reality is the realm not of merely intersubjectivity as social interaction in the here and now, but a distributed, *communal matrix of existence* or communal ecology of productive life-making (life creating and life sustaining productive mutuality).

In the next step, there is space in this approach (termed transformative activist stance) to address a person—a whole person—who is *collectively co-constituted as an individually unique community member* (both locally and on the world-historical scale) and who comes about as such a unique community member by *agentively contributing to*, or mattering in, these communities, in a coordinated process of a *self-and-world/other co-realizing* (Stetsenko, 2023). This view insists that people are profoundly social yet sovereign beings in the entirety of their hu/wo/man/ity, the uniqueness of their unrepeatable individuality, the irreplaceable singularity of their infinite creative potentialities, and their incalculable worth to the world—with all these predicated on profound solidarity and relationality of inalienable bonds as the core condition of existence. Human development at the level of the whole person, in this perspective, is arguably constituted by, and consists of, mutual spirals of a communal and productive (performed, embodied, enacted) "doing of the real" in the *practices of life/world making* through a simultaneous self-and-world(other)-co-real/izing in its ontologically primary status.

Many of these connotations can be traced back to Marx's works, to the notion of *social praxis* and as enigmatically expressed in his idea that *each*

person is an ensemble of social relations. Vygotsky takes up these connotations if even still struggling to articulate their implications. This means not just placing emphasis on humans and their ecologies/realities being entangled in some "naturalistic transactions" comprised of various forces such as biological, cultural, and social ones. Neither is it merely about people interacting with each other in the "here and now"—though such interaction is critically important—as is the case with understanding communication/interactivity in traditional mainstream approaches (Butchart, 2019). Instead, this is about mattering within *a communal matrix of world-making practices* predicated on the idea of *communing* (or *commonning* – Dawney, 2013), expressing the communal inter- and intra-active/collaborative/shared production of life/world as a simultaneous co-constitution of reality and people themselves.

Again, what is theorized in this approach to broach the topic of the whole person *is the level of individually unique life trajectory of mattering within communities*—with its particular living functionalities (goals and tasks)—that is coextensive, commensurate, and co-substantive with our common existence not as organisms or bodies (this is not denied yet reserved for other, independent levels of analysis) but as participants in and, more critically, agents/actors of human communities. The living functionalities (goals and tasks) in this process have to do with finding out how to belong via agentively contributing to living one's life—centering especially on "who am I?" and, specifically, "who am I among other people?" questions. These questions have to do with how the person contributes to or matters within (with a vital presupposition that *everybody matters*, always and inevitably) the shared life of communities to which they belong, in which development is understood as the growing ability of such contributing/mattering. Thus, this is centrally about *learning to be oneself in human communities*, and not just passively, but be as an *agentive actor* who actively and consequentially matters in these communities while asking "*How can I contribute*?" (Anzaldúa, 2002, p. 557) and, thus, through this, learning to discover, in the words of Maya Angelou, "the sense of myself in the world" (Douglas, 2019, p. 47).

Though apparently focused on the individual person and life trajectory, these questions, emphatically, are not about who I am *by myself*, in a supposed vacuum and isolation of some solitary existence. Instead, the question is "who am I *among, with, and for other people*?" in this world shared with others, where my very being and becoming is part and parcel in the being and becoming of all others—whether immediately present or long gone and, importantly, yet to come. This is where my unique being encompasses that of all other people, while the being of all others is the condition for my very existence, as in Indigenous perspectives like Ubuntu ontology, an Indigenous South African perspective (Muthivhi, 2021). This echoes Vygotsky's (1997a) otherwise enigmatic words that the process of human development "is part of the total process of the historical development of humanity" (p. 39).

Central to this view is the effort to approach an understanding of the person as being on a constant, uninterrupted path of a continuous, emerging becoming (never essentialized nor reified at any of its moments) composed of one's mattering in the shared, communal world-making. Such mattering is realized via our being-with-knowing-with-and-doing-with others, constituting a more or less *durable path in life, a unique trajectory or a life journey* (relevant are also concepts of life project, see Stetsenko, 2012; 2017; 2020b; and leading activity, see Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004a; Vianna & Stetsenko, 2011). Human development then, considered through the lens of a whole person perspective, is a dynamic, emergent, unique journey with no preprogrammed algorithms, forever open-ended and thrust into the future, always changing yet cumulative, shared with others at its core by way of contributing to common pursuits and endeavors, yet predicated on creating individually unique novelty every step of the way.

Note also that this is about a journey with its ever-shifting horizon, rather than any final destination, assuming no possibility of achieving any final, undifferentiated state of wholeness. This approach implicates looking deeper into essential meanings of life and of being human, broadly predicated on understanding that "man [sic] is not his body, which is a thing, nor his soul, psyche, conscience, or spirit, which is also a thing. Man is no thing, but a drama—his life, a pure and universal happening which happens to each one of us and in which each one in his turn is nothing but happening" (Ortega y Gasset, 1962, pp. 199-200). This resonates with Vygotsky's notion of

drama (Yaroshevsky, 1993) and with James Baldwin's (1970) important claim that "we know that man is not a thing and is not to be placed at the mercy of things."

Debunking the notion of the solipsistic "person" while not losing sight of each person's individuality and sovereignty is in sync with decolonizing research and many approaches that have already made strides in this direction. Indeed, there are echoes with diverse perspectives here, such as Deleuze, in unison with Marx, rejecting the notion of a solitary individual with intrinsic properties, yet focusing on singularities, that is, patterns and modes of organized forces that come to bear *as* individual experience (Tucker, 2012). Yet, it is the voices of Indigenous traditions and of others whose perspectives and experiences have been marginalized—especially scholars of color and those from the Global South—that provide the most stunning revelations about the need to address the whole person under the angle of communality and togetherness as in the Black radical tradition with its focus on "the shared sense of obligation to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality" (Robinson, 1983, p. 171). Also central are Gloria Anzaldúa's (2003, p. 20) works highlighting spaces of in-betweenness across cultures and identities whereby "*Nepantleras* [persons who navigate liminal spaces]…serve as agents of awakening, inspire and challenge others to deeper awareness, greater *conocimiento*, serve as reminders of each other's search for wholeness of being." And much can be learned from the philosophy of Buen Vivir, with its "communal notion of wellbeing shared by many Indigenous communities and social movements" (see Bakal & Vásquez Reyes, 2023). This philosophy specifically implies "an integrating *holistic vision of the human being* [emphasis added], immersed in the great earthly community" (Guillen, 2014, p. 196; drawing on Leonardo Boff).

Instead of Conclusions: Creating Conditions for People to Be Whole

What remains critical to interrogate is the following: Why and for what purposes could the concept of the whole person be applicable and useful? This is critical because, as highlighted throughout this paper, concepts are not just abstractions but rather (dual) artifacts contingent on, operational within, and consubstantial with particular living functionalities (goals and tasks) of productive communal practices of being-knowing-doing, including understanding and research. Arguably, understandings of the whole person are especially (though not exclusively) commensurate with the goals and functionalities of research on and practices of education, specifically if the latter is understood as dedicated to the formation of "future persons" (cf. Amsler & Facer, 2017) while also being, in the words of bell hooks (1994), about striving for "knowledge about *how to live in the world*" (pp. 14-15).

The critical core of what I understand by an *activist trans/formative methodology* in the spirit of Vygotsky's project is as follows. Traditionally, research is expected to, objectively and dispassionately, record, catalog, and document "what is" while excluding researchers' motivations, ethical end/standpoints, and goals. This is typically in line with the assumption that people and their agency do not matter, especially in terms of large-scale structural changes. Thus, the dominant models take the world in its status quo for granted and assume it to be fixed and immutable, extending into the future unchanged, supposedly impervious to transformation and our agency. My expansion of the Marxist-Vygotskian methodology suggests that it is futile to attempt to know how the world is, as it is—because *nothing simply is,* that is, nothing is set in stone, out there to be grasped, understood, learned about in its ostensible constancy and putative "givenness/objectivity," outside of our engagement with what we are grasping and understanding. Nothing exists outside and independently of our agentive con/frontations with, and contributions to, collective social praxis embodied in struggles, such as those for social justice and a better world. This is because we are continuously (without interruption at any point) and always already transforming "what is" (the world) and, therefore, also ourselves, in a bi-directional and perpetually evolving spiral of mutual co-realization.

Again, this approach resonates with scholarships of resistance—Indigenous perspectives and those developed by scholars of color and from the Global South. Sylvia Wynter (1995, p. 47), for example, has explicitly called for a new approach that "will have to take as its referent subject (in the place of our present referent of the bourgeois mode of the subject and its conception of the individual), the *concrete individual* human subject." She argues that "the struggle of the new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the

well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves" (Wynter, 2003, p. 260).

Similarly, Maturana and Varela (1992, p. 11) propose a way to see knowledge "not as a representation of the world 'out there,' but rather as an ongoing bringing forth of a world through the process of living itself." This overall approach, above all, is not about simply recording the models of personhood/self in their current states, in the present status quo, limited and oppressed as they are by the destructive forces of capitalist regimes of power. Instead, this is about futurism and imagination, hope and possibility, and the striving to move beyond the present.

To put it in a maximally straightforward way (and perhaps deceptively simply): *the whole person is not "something" that can be studied or researched*—and not only because the whole person is not some "thing." Even more critical is that the whole person cannot be said to simply exist, in the form of some fixed *is*ness. Instead, the whole person, today, is an "alter-reality" that potentially can *be brought forth*—especially by persons themselves, rather than via any top-down imposition (though researchers and educators might facilitate these processes, in becoming allies in the struggles of solidarity).

Perhaps the most critical point is that the whole person concept is not merely, and not so much, a theoretical construct (along with, actually, all other concepts). Rather, it is *an invitation to a struggle* for creating conditions that will nurture a collectively organized self-invention and communal co-creation of theoretical and practical alternatives to the status quo—where people as whole persons could indeed flourish and be truly whole. Vygotsky, clearly, participated in such a struggle (Stetsenko & Arievitch, 2004b) as made clear by his passionate role in no less than creating post-capitalist education as the grounds for "a revolutionary form of human who rises from the ruins of previous social orders" (Sandoval, 2000, p. 160), if even his voice did not always match up with his own revolutionary activist stance and practices of life/society-and-self-co/realizing.

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Anna Stetsenko

PhD in Psychology from the Moscow State Lomonosov University. Professor at the Graduate Center of The City University of New York, New York. United States.

E-mail: astetsenko@gc.cuny.edu

https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0960-8875

Correspondence address:

The Graduate Center of The City University of New York. 365 5th Avenue, New York – NY 10016. United States.

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