

## THE AFFECTION-INTELLECT RELATION AND THE SEMANTIC UNITY PROPOSITION IN THE VYGOTSKIAN APPROACH TO INTELLECTUAL DISABILITY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper problematizes the intellectual disability issue in Vygotsky's scientific production in conjunction with two central issues that emerge from it: the unity of affect-intellect and the semantic system of consciousness. The systemic and interfunctional dimension permeates and marks Vygotsky's production about intellectual disability when he argues that psychological functions are organized in systems that establish constant connections among themselves, and (con)form the personality based on a given social context. In the set of these propositions, Vygotsky places affect and its relation with the intellect as fundamental elements for understanding the human psyche in its specificities, such as those presented in schizophrenia, intellectual disability, etc. Our objective is to revisit Vygotsky's work, discussing: the notion of system and the relations between intellect-affect and his proposition of semantic unity of consciousness - catalyzed by the word (meaning). We therefore argue that such a proposition and its articulation with the concepts of meaning in psychological activity are fundamental to understanding intellectual disability, bringing practical and therapeutic implications for developmental psychology.

**Keywords:** mental retardation; Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich, 1896-1934; historical-cultural psychology

### Relación Afecto-Intelecto y la proposición de unidad semántica en el abordaje vygotkiana de la deficiencia intelectual

#### RESUMEN

En este estudio se problematiza la cuestión de la deficiencia intelectual en la producción científica de Vygotsky en articulación con dos cuestiones centrales que de ella emergen: la unidad afecto-intelecto y el sistema semántico de la consciencia. La dimensión sistémica e interfuncional atraviesa y marca la producción de Vygotsky sobre la deficiencia intelectual al defender que funciones psicológicas están organizadas en sistemas que establecen constante conexiones entre sí, y (con)forman la personalidad a partir de una determinada contextura social. En el conjunto de esas proposiciones, Vygotsky pone el afecto y su relación con el intelecto como elementos fundamentales para comprenderse el psiquismo humano en sus especificidades, tales como se presenta en la esquizofrenia, deficiencia intelectual etc. Nuestro objetivo, por lo tanto, es visitar la obra vygotkyana, discutiéndose: la noción de sistema y las relaciones entre intelecto-afecto y su proposición de unidad semántica de la consciencia catalizada por la palabra (significación). Defendemos, con eso, que tal proposición y su articulación con los conceptos de sentido en la actividad psicológica son fundamentales para la comprensión de la deficiencia intelectual trayendo implicaciones prácticas y terapéuticas para la psicología del desarrollo.

**Palabras clave:** retraso mental; Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich, 1896-1934; psicología histórico-cultural

### Relação afeto-intelecto e a proposição de unidade semântica na abordagem vygotkiana da deficiência intelectual

#### RESUMO

Este trabalho problematiza a questão da deficiência intelectual na produção científica de Vigotski em articulação com duas questões centrais que dela emergem: a unidade afeto-intelecto e o sistema semântico da consciência. A dimensão sistêmica e interfuncional atravessa e marca a produção de Vigotski sobre a deficiência intelectual ao defender que funções psicológicas estão organizadas em sistemas que estabelecem constantes conexões entre si, e (con)formam a personalidade a partir de uma determinada contextura social. No conjunto dessas proposições, Vigotski coloca o afeto e sua relação com o intelecto como elementos fundamentais para se entender o psiquismo humano em suas

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especificidades, tais como se apresentam na esquizofrenia, deficiência intelectual. O nosso objetivo, portanto, é revisitar a obra vigotskiana, discutindo: a noção de sistema e as relações entre intelecto-afeto e sua proposição de unidade semântica da consciência - catalisada pela palavra (significação). Defendemos, com isso, que tal proposição e sua articulação com os conceitos de sentido na atividade psicológica são fundamentais à compreensão da deficiência intelectual trazendo implicações práticas e terapêuticas para a psicologia do desenvolvimento.

**Palavras-chave:** retardo mental; Vygotsky, Lev Semenovich, 1896-1934; psicologia histórico-cultural

## INTRODUCTION

The Cultural-Historical Theory of L. S. Vygotsky (1896-1934) presents itself as an original and innovative psychological approach to human development that, at the same time, leads to practice and social transformation. A long time ago, in the historical post-Russian Revolution period, such approach was connected in an intricate relation with art and education – which were in the center of scientific and social preoccupations in the search for a means to overcome capitalism.

The most important aspects that were highlighted in Vygotsky's intellectual work include, in a robust explanation on the cultural-historical constitution of psychism, a systemic and dynamic approach to human development in his studies on pedology, the theory of supercompensation in the analysis of disability, and the relation between teaching, learning, and development. In addition, his production includes consistent and inspiring elaborations on art and esthetic education and on what we nowadays call inclusive education.

In this sphere, in the so-called defectologic works by Vygotsky (1997) – despite the term that was characteristic of the period – in an analysis of the specificities of the psychological formation that is considered atypical, there are discussions involving the social constitution of disability and sharp criticisms to society models that are ruled by exclusion and on the grading of bodies and individuals. In a way that was quite innovating for the time, the author's work points at a criticism against the "abnormal" label and proposes the establishment of a vision that was more propositional for developments affected by disability.

More specifically, in the author's elaborations in the issue of intellectual disability, it is possible to observe the emergence of thought-provoking propositions on the centrality of affection and sign in human consciousness and their confluence into the transformation of personality – which is our intention to verify in this text. The discussion on these points leads to crucial questions regarding symptoms and diagnosis, as well as questions about pedagogical approaches and methodologies for clinical and therapeutic work with disability in general. However, such intention also leads to central questions towards a comprehension of psychism and of the human constitution that is rooted on the overcoming of dichotomies – especially the classic Cartesian opposition between the intellect and affection, which is a very present-day educational-political concern.

Although Vygotsky's interests in themes related

to affection appear more clearly in the final stages of the author's life – discussions on the theme gain more emphasis in texts from the 1930's, such as "*Teoría de las emociones: estudio histórico-psicológico*" (Vygotsky, 2004), written between 1931 and 1933, and "Biological Basis of affection" (Vygotsky, 2020), from 1930 – it is important to point at small works and detours into Psychology and its interface with Education and Art. According to important biographers (Van der Veer & Valsiner, 2001), Vygotsky's ventures into this field are especially motivated by the author's riveting interest in learning how affected his students were by literature and poetry in his classes. On the other hand, it is interesting to observe that it is exactly in the area of studies on disability that problems related to affection become relevant.

In a study named "On the compensation processes in the development of children who are mentally retarded" (Vygotsky, 2018), the author engages us with a stimulating discussion on affection, and its role as mobilizing element in the creation of alternative ways for development, as propulsion towards the overcoming of difficulties and the formation of compensation processes. Such proposition, although relevant, is not investigated by the author at this moment of his theoretical elaboration. It was revisited with more special attention in later texts and led to important contribution to studies in disability. Furthermore, it produced an innovating, complex, and integral comprehension of the process of constitution of psychism and personality.

In confronting disability, two fundamental notions or issues emerge: the affection-intellect unity and the semantic system of consciousness. In this article, our intention is to revisit these notions in an approach to the issue of intellectual disability based on Vygotsky's ideas and notes in texts that the author wrote on the theme and their implication in human development. This starting point is rooted in Vygotskian propositions that were present, especially, in his text on compensation processes and, after that, in "On Psychological Systems" (Vygotsky, 2004) and "The Mental Handicap Problem" (Vygotsky, 1997). As we will observe, together these texts point at a systemic, inter-functional, and semantic comprehension of human psychism that highlights the problem of the intellect-affection unit that is based on Spinoza's philosophy.

The articulation between these two texts is crucial for a deeper comprehension of the problems that involve affection and the functional systems of the organization

of psychism. The text “On Psychological Systems”, published in 1930, was elaborated at a time when Vygotsky had already written “The historical meaning of the crisis in Psychology” and that, consequently, was dedicated to the explanation and consolidation of a dialectic psychology, of cultural and historical nature (Van der Veer e Valsiner, 2001). This text really seems to constitute a study that aims at producing the bases and routes for such psychology. However, “The mental disability problem”, published after the author’s death in 1935, is denser and presents a demonstration of epistemological objectives for the field. Vygotsky also emphasizes the relevance of the affection-intellect unity and of the semantic unity – or the unity of meaning or of consciousness.

In a preliminary analysis, it is possible to identify the relation between the two texts on the themes and propositions produced by the author regarding studies in the inter-functional relations as well as the connection between the psychological systems, with the centrality of language – despite the different nuance given to this matter in the texts. However, the comparative study leads to the conclusion that in the first text there are embryonic elements that constitute the second text in the consolidation of a Concrete Psychology that is situated on materialistic, historical, and dialectic bases that are based on the principle of signification.

In this sense, our effort in this text is focused on the search for the details concerning conceptual principles and reflexive propositions by the author when he discusses intellectual disability and its connection with the affection dynamics and the defense of psychism and of the semantic unity of conscience. By analyzing these matters we can contribute to the field of disability studies and of human development towards reflexive propositions that might inspire practices that point at the principles of the dialectic unity of psychism.

#### **THE NOTION OF SYSTEM AND THE RELATIONS BETWEEN AFFECTION AND INTELLECT: THE EMERGENCE OF THE SEMANTIC UNITY – OR OF MEANING – OF CONSCIOUSNESS**

In the text on psychological systems, Vygotsky (2004) initiates the discussion by explaining that exposure is the result of experimentation, an unfinished attempt to theoretically interpret the content that was produced in a series of studies that aimed at integrating two research lines regarding human development: a genetic line and a pathological line. There was emphasis on the relation between the superior psychological functions and the specific concept of personality, of a more complex and integral nature, characterizing psychological systems.

The author defends the idea that, during the historical process of behavior development, there are significant changes. Such changes do not occur exclusively in the functions. More precisely, they affect the relations in the interconnection of the functions. “That is the

reason why the essential difference is often not caused by inter-functional change when we go from one level to another. Sometimes, it is caused by inter-functional changes, by changes in the inter-functional connections, and by the inter-functional structure” (Vygotsky 2004, p. 105). In this argumentative line, he concludes that “the psychological system will be ruled by these new and immutable relations in which the functions are situated, with the same content that is usually provided to this concept unfortunately too wide” (p. 106). It is interesting to observe that he denounces the mistake of theorizing before the right time and proceeds to expose the facts, theoretical perspectives and experimental studies, regarding the problem of aphasia and schizophrenia in the field of pathology and of the age of transition in genetic psychology to elucidate his theses.

His discussion starts with the functions that are regarded as simpler, discussing the relations between the sensory and the motor processes. Thus, he demonstrates that theoretical considerations and studies of experimental character showed that the senses and motricity constitute a unique physiological set – defended by gestalt figures such as Goldstein, Köhler, Koffka etc. The sensory-motor idea was, thus, confirmed in animals, very small children, and adults – to whom these processes were very close to affection. However, regarding man, a gradual change was produced, according to Vygotsky: motricity gradually gained a character that is relatively independent regarding the sensory processes, and they, in turn, isolated themselves from the direct motor impulses and, among them, more complex relations appeared. So, he presented Luria’s experiments as the combined motor method (when it possible to re-establish the direct connection between the motor and sensory impulses). In these experiments, the type of movement was the means by which it was possible to re-establish the curves of the internal reactions – which is characteristic of the precocious stages of development.

Thus, he defended that the sensory and motor processes, interpreted in the psychological plan, gain relative independence and the motricity of an adult individual is characterized by the new connections, and the new relations caused by such motricity are aligned with other personality spheres, with the other psychological functions. Even concerning the case of a child’s perception, he admits that it gains a certain independence, in a way that is different from what happens to the other animals: [...] “the later development of the perception consists of establishing a complicated synthesis with other functions, concretely with the language function. This synthesis is so complex that, except for pathological cases, it becomes impossible to establish the basic structure of perception” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 109).

The functions, he says, establish new relations among themselves and along development while engaging in

complicated combinations and working as a team, in new systems, that prove rather difficult to decompose and whose disintegration can only be observed in pathology – as in aphasia. His examples, also, are in line with processes that are intentionally mediated such as remembering words with the help of images; children that remember words with the help of images support themselves with fantasy, not only with memory, the author emphasizes. Such process depends on a series of new functions and not only on natural memory in some sort of fusion of thought with memory – logical memory (revisiting the experiments by Leontiev and Zankov, researchers with whom he worked). In mediated memory, thought starts to occupy a first plan: an adult person who remembers a list of words with the help of a series of images realize operations that imply mental relations between the sign, the image and what is remembered.

In all examples and analyses of the different functions and their connections, Vygotsky highlights the fact that there is regularity in the formation of new systems that imply a question of connection in the brain among these new systems, their relation with the physiologic substrate, and produces the general law of development, with an emphasis on the role played by language:

In the beginning, it is a connection between children and those around them, but at the moment children start speaking to themselves, it can be considered the collective transposition of behavior toward the practice of individual behavior (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 112)./

It is possible to reach an important conclusion: at first, all superior functions were divided into two parts – mutual psychological process and dialogue. However, with the appearance of new connections among the functions (fact that plays a pivotal role in the development domain), children start issuing instructions and following them, they also start realizing actions targeting others and themselves. Language consolidates itself, in this process, as a means to understand itself. It is interesting that, after that, the term “sign” starts to be used:

If we consider its real origin, every sign is a means of communication and, we could more assertively say that it is a means of connection for certain psychic functions of social character. Translated by ourselves, it is the means for uniting the functions in ourselves, and we will demonstrate that without this sign the brain and its initial connections cannot turn into complex relations, which is something that happens thanks to language (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 114).

In addition to being means of social communication, signs are fundamental for the comprehension of complex psychological functions and the connections they create among themselves. They

are a means of connection for psychic functions, of social character, which turn into a form of behavior, into individual psychological functions. By commenting on the Kaffir dream, for example, he emphasizes that it plays in the tribe the same role as thought does for us because dreams go into relations that are completely new for a series of functions, which can be observed regarding a whole series of different psychological processes. After all, to the Kaffir, the new behavior system comes from certain ideological concepts: the individual concept of the dream (of its function) is integrated with the conceptual system of the tribe, marked by the process of signification and biological processes.

It is important to emphasize , on the one hand, the connection kept by some systems not only with social signs, but also with ideology, and the meaning that a given psychological function gains in people’s consciousness, because, on the other hand, the process of appearance of new forms of behavior, based on a new content, is extracted by man form the ideology of the surrounding environment. (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 117).

In this discussion on psychological systems, Vygotsky also focuses on the age of

transition and emphasizes that the essence of psychological development is not based on development as a process of merely evolutive nature. Rather, it is based on the change in connections that are established throughout the whole process. Based on Leontiev’s studies, it is possible to highlight the fact that the central characteristic of this age is the change in thought relations and other functions and there is a change in the process as a whole, as a result of the formation of concepts.

To Vygotsky, the key to the comprehension of all development processes, and also to the treatment and eradication of pathological cases, consists of the formation of concepts and of functions that consolidate and define themselves in the age of transition. The concept appears as central, as a complete and complex psychological system. However, it is understood in a different way from formal logic, by the dialectic logic. In a new formulation of the problem of formation of concept in psychology, he proposes that by becoming increasingly wide, the concept refers to an increasing number of objects, it does not get either richer or poorer in content, without limiting itself to a set of features abstracted from objects in a formal scheme. The concept does not consist of a frozen photograph from a collection of characteristics of a certain object, neither does it depend on the erasure of the individual features of the object; it shows itself in its relations and connections.in this sense, in more psychological terms, Vygotsky concludes, it presents itself as a possibility to develop thought and, finally, a conception of the world. “In this sense, the

observation by V. I. Lenin on Hegel proves admirable to me when it says that the most uncomplicated fact of generalization contains a conviction regarding the world outside, of what we are not perfectly conscious” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 122).

In fact, only at the age of transition, this function gets formalized and teenagers start thinking with/by concepts, based on the other thought system, of complex connections.

The concept is a system of appreciations, which includes a relation when it comes to a system that is much wider. The age of transition is the age for structuring the conception of the world and of personality, of the birth of self-conscience and of coherent ideas regarding the world (Vygotsky, 2004, p.123).

In this sense, he testifies that it is during the age of transition that there is a consolidation of the definitive formation of all psychological systems. Thus, he argues that one solution for comprehending this age is the psychology of schizophrenia, and therefore focusing on a series of studies (from authors such as Blonski and Kretschmer), by discussing the problems of schizophrenia and the age of transition (the characteristic features of one can be seen on the other; what is manifested in the age of transition in a confused way reaches its limit in pathology) – despite the mistakes in the formulation of the problem and the authors’ conclusions. In fact, according to Vygotsky (2004), schizophrenia and the age of transition are inversely related to each other: in the first one, he says it is possible to observe a disintegration of the functions that are created in the age of transition and, although they cross each other in the same stations, such functions are headed opposite ways and affirms: “the essence of the issue in this case is not located especially in the intellection and affection changes. It is located in the elevation of existing connections” (p. 124); after all, “the first thing that gets disintegrated in a schizophrenic person is the function of concept formation”; and there might be a change in the correlation between intellectual and emotional life. “The ideas and feelings remain the same but they lose the function they served in the complex system” (p. 125). There is a disintegration of the systems that are of social origin, although the functions are preserved in themselves (memory, attention, perception, etc).

It is interesting that, at this moment he will go for Spinoza by highlighting his genetic position or perspective regarding affection in order to argue that:

In the process of ontogenetic development, human emotions connect with general norms regarding self-conscience of personality as well as conscience of reality. (...) This complicated synthesis underlies our lives. The historical development of affections or emoticons fundamentally consists of the

alteration of initial connections in which they produced themselves and there is the creation of a new order and of new connections. (...) In simple terms, our affections interact with our concepts in a complicated system. (Vygotsky, 2004, pp.126-127).

Thus, in Schizophrenia, when systems disintegrate and there is a certain affection disability, affections split and act in the margin of this ideological and conceptual system, or, contrarily, affections start modifying thought, which is at the service of emotional necessities and interests.

In a nutshell, the study of systems and their functions is instructive for the comprehension of development as well as for its disintegration, which has implications in the educational and clinical fields. The key to comprehension lies in the idea of the psychological systems that do not come straight from the connection of functions. It comes from the connection systems – in clear opposition to the locationist theory; what we could observe in the psychic processes is the joint activity of diverse areas in a complex collaboration among a series of distinct zones. “The brain substrate of the psychic processes is not integrated by isolated sectors. It is integrated by complex systems of the whole brain device” (Vygotsky, 2004, p. 131).

Highlighting the work by K. Lewin, Vygotsky says Lewin is right when he affirms that the formation of psychological concepts coincides with the development of personality – which will be condensed in this text about mental handicap.

In “The problem of mental handicap”, Vygotsky (1997) focuses on the intellect-affection relation in the theoretical and experimental approach to the disability problem, bringing interesting conclusions in the argumentative line that placed language and semantic processes as central for human psychism and conscience. In this context, the author proposes a discussion on the most important tendencies or theoretical currents that faced the issue and were in clear opposition. According to the author, in the intellectualist tendency, the “mental insufficiency” or “intellectual deficit” and presented itself as the fundamental element in the problem, so that all other aspects of personality were secondary in the sequence of problems to be approached and overcome. It was not possible, this way, to see the essential difference in another sphere that makes up human psychism: the affection-volition sphere. On the other hand, the tendency that predominated in this sphere and focused on the volition disorder as a cornerstone for discussing disability, there was evidence of the absence or fundamental insufficiency in the higher level of development of volition and its basic impulses. People with intellectual disabilities, in this approach, were in need of moral and intellectual volition, and of primary volition at the same time. There was even the belief that they had no capacity to freely apply their

mental faculties to phenomena of moral and abstract character, leading to a form of volition atrophy. Anyway, “mental weakness” was the fundamental source for the explanation of the mental handicap problem.

In the review of the problem, a double source proved very productive, to Vygotsky: i) the clinical studies in the area of experimental psychology – on the different forms of “mental weakness”, especially the non-congenital ones, on schizophrenia and epidemic encephalitis – insertion of the concept of emotional dementia, impulse dementia; extra-intellectual factors in the origin of dementia; and ii) the studies on effect and action, highlighting their importance for psychic life and intellectual functions.

In the area of clinical psychiatry and experimental psychology, the work of Kurt Lewin stood out on the dynamic theory of mental weakness in children, centered on the comprehensive spheres of psychic life, of personality. In German structural psychology, there was emphasis on the work of Kohler, which was dedicated to the very nature of the intellectual act of the anthropoid monkeys, considering the variations of the structures of the visible field, differences regarding children with mental handicaps.

Vygotsky (1997, p. 125) pays extra attention to Lewin's theory, highlighting the differences of the triple gender forming “man's individual characteristic”: 1. In the structure of personality; 2. In the psychic material and in the state of the psychic systems; and 3. Differences in the content and in the meaning of the systems: can be different in children from different societies, and cultures depending on specific historical characteristics.

Thus, the author argued on the necessity to clarify the specific radical differences of the personality of children who are mentally handicapped in comparison with children who are considered normal: especially, the matter of differentiation in psychic life. In this case, two fundamental characteristics of mentally handicapped children stood out: the degree of differentiation of the personality structure (a smaller child) and properties of the psychic material – less dynamism of the psychic systems (older child). For children with mental handicap, different situations are a whole that is much more divided and closed, which would generate difficulties to engage in the activity and if the task demands a connection among the situations or simultaneous participation; in addition to demanding greater energy in the pursuit of objective and concentration, which leads to a new activity more easily.

The particularities of emotional life would explain the particularities of intellectual processes – two separate facts, turn into interdependent parts of a single whole. The differentiation and complexification of psychological systems in mentally handicapped children would take place in combination with the more concrete character of thought and the degree of differentiation of personality,

its lesser mobility in certain situations and problems. In the children that are considered normal, there would be a possibility to vary the perceived field in accordance with volition – capacity to voluntarily concentrate attention on the different aspects and moments of the situation. This differentiation would be more important than the properties of the psychic material itself.

In a critical analysis of the facts and of the theoretical principles, Vygotsky argues that the dynamic theory of Lewin situates the problem beyond the limitations of the intellectualist theory, in the pillars of the theory of psychic life in general and that also establishes a cornerstone for studies in the area: the area of unity between intellect and affection in the development of mentally handicapped children.

On the other hand, among the problems of the dynamic theory, according to Vygotsky (1997), there is the fact that the problem of intellect and affection are established and solved in an anti-dialectic, metaphysical way, which is away from the idea of development. Lewin includes mentally handicapped children in his analysis with an assumed psychological pattern or a measure for checking the intellectual operation of the monkey, establishing the problem as marginal to development and the consideration of the intellect as invariable essence from the metaphysical point of view. Lewin distinguished the particularities that were inherent to the material of dynamic systems from the structure of these systems by dividing the distinctive particularities of affection in concrete varieties, but considered the intellect as a unique whole that is uniform and homogeneous. Thus, we lose track of the dependence between intellectual and affection processes, and the problem of intellect and affection is placed in similar situations, while affection was regarded in an anti-dialectical manner.

Vygotsky emphasized that he did not know the basic dialectic rule: in the course of development, cause and consequence change places, that is, the superior psychological functions play a retro-active role in the processes that originate them. He argued that the physiological functions are not the only ones that change, the inter-functional connections and the relations among the different processes also change – according to the arguments in his text about psychological systems.

Vygotsky's conclusion points at the fact that the problem with both intellectualism and voluntarism is the same: the metaphysical character of both theories – they consider the essential basis of the process as singular essence, which is isolated from the conditions of existence and does not change the course of development.

Vygotsky (1997) argues that there are not two classes of dynamics regardless of the character of the functions, which are moved by the dynamic processes. Neither are there two independent classes of independent activities of the dynamic systems. There are, in fact, two units

of dynamic functions: thought and real activity. Thus, thought and real activity are not isolated spheres – in living reality, we can observe the transformation of thought into action, and of action into thought. In this sense, he believes there is an interdependence between affection and intellection which testifies to the impossibility of non-motivated thought and of action without affection cause.

At this moment, the author makes a direct reference to Spinoza, demonstrating the philosopher's affection definition: "the thing that increases or diminishes our body capacity for activity and forces our thought to move in a different direction" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 351).

The central mistake in Lewin's theory is rooted on the fact that, to Vygotsky (1997), he separates the problem of dynamics from the problem of intellect and does not treat the relations among them. The possibilities for rational and free activity – man's distinctive characteristic – is present in Engels's perspective (1979) because "only man can leave the footprints of his volition in nature" (p. 353); intellect cannot develop without activities, especially at work. Vygotsky (1997) argues that special research works demonstrate that "the degree of development is the variation degree of the affection dynamics, of the dynamics of real action, in the dynamics of thought" (p. 355).

He highlights three series of experiments in which the affection and the intellect in children's activities were assessed: 1. Activity Saturation – mentally handicapped children: change of activity, overcome negative affections with the introduction of other stimuli, instruments (pencil); normal child: change in the meaning of the activity (helping classmate) with possible removal of all stimuli; 2. Tendency to revisit the interrupted activity considering the affection impulse that was not liberated – sensibility regarding the visual, perceptive field; the mentally handicapped child remains a slave to this field; 3. The character of substitution in the affection tendency of the interrupted activities: change in the fundamental activity without altering the meaning (modeling a dog, drawing a dog), change without altering the nature of the activity (modeling a track for a train); essential difference: opposite attitude in mentally handicapped children – the task that is similar in meaning does not present itself as substitutive.

By commenting on such studies and research works, Vygotsky (1997) affirms: "The meaning of the situation for the child determined the force of emotional impulse related to the situation" (p. 356). Here, it is important to emphasize what dimension of meaning stands out and leads to an elaboration on human consciousness. The superior psychological functions are, in his concept, functions that are intellectual and volitional at the same time: "Superior psychological functions are equally

connected to a distinct intellectual nature, such as a different emotional nature. The whole problem consists of the fact that thought and affection represent parts of a single whole: human consciousness" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 354). In this discussion, he argues that the interiorization and command of superior psychological functions go hand-in-hand with what he calls semantic unity – of meaning – of the systems that constitute consciousness, consolidating his theoretical elaboration that had been initiated in the texts in which he discusses the genesis of the functions regarding the psychological systems.

In this sense, Vygotsky assertively defends that it is necessary to find the indivisible unity between affection and intellect – which, in our opinion, leads to the proposition of the semantic unity of consciousness – sign – which is evident in this text, and expands into later works with the development of his theory.

## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

### **The emergence of unity: psychological systems catalyzed by signification and intellectual disability**

Throughout this text, we aimed at demonstrating that, by approaching the theme of intellectual disability in Vygotsky, we are not engaging in a discussion that is exclusively of defectologic nature. We rather synthesize epistemological matters that are central for a comprehension of human psychism in a cultural-historical approach. With a luster of scientific legacy, the author proposes the unity of affection and intellectual processes and invites us to assess intellectual disability not only from the perspective of deficit, but also as a deciphering of the processes and mechanisms that constitute intellectual disability. Thus, Vygotsky advances in his defense that "it all comes down to the fact that thought and affection represent parts of a single whole – human consciousness" (Vygotsky, 1997, p. 268) and by establishing that psychism organizes itself by means of inter-functional connections and relations among psychological-functions/psychological systems in which the word was the structural nucleus.

In the beginning of the text "On Psychological Systems", Vygotsky (2004) discussed the intricate relation between thought and language and emphasized the change in the initial connection among the functions (by approaching the phylogenesis and the ontogenesis). He argued that this relation did not remain the same during the later development of a child; there were changes with concrete connections. Even concerning schizophrenia, the issue was faced by Vygotsky. He was more interested in studies in this pathology in the final years of his production, by discussing the involution of processes and the disintegration of the concept – which is also revisited in "The Construction of Thought and Language" (Vygotsky, 2001).

In this last text, Vygotsky dedicates himself to the discussion of the inner relation between thought

and language, during the stages of phylogenetic and ontogenetic development; especially, the relation between consciousness and word, meaning/signification. The relations appear and constitute themselves uniquely in the process of historical development of human consciousness; they are the product, rather than the premise, of the formation of man. It does not mean that they are two external forces, which are independent and flow and act in parallel, while crossing each other at a certain moment and going into mechanical interaction according to him, the most common mistake in investigations, whose ensuing method was doomed to fail:

(...) in order to explain the properties of discourse thought as a totality, he had decomposed this totality into its constitutional elements – thought and language, which do not have properties that are inherent to this totality – and, thus, in advance, shut the door for the explanation of these properties (Vygotsky, 2001, p. 396).

Then he makes a comparison with the decomposition of water into isolated molecule of oxygen and hydrogen.

Equally, arguing that verbal thought contains intellectual processes and verbal functions is the same as affirming something that regards all verbal thought and all its properties. Thus, it implies saying nothing about each concrete problem that challenges the investigation of discourse thought. (Vygotsky, 2001, p. 397).

What Vygotsky did then was to replace the analysis that applies the method of decomposition into elements for analysis that breaks the complex unity of discourse thought into different units, which can be understood as objects for analysis.

We found in the meaning of the word this unity that reflects in a simple way the unity of thought and language. The meaning of the word, as we tried to clarify previously, is an unbreakable unity between both processes and we cannot say that it is a phenomenon of language or a phenomenon of thought. The word without a meaning is not a word, it is an empty sound. Therefore, meaning is an indispensable constitutional element of the word. It is the word itself seen from its inner perspective. (...) it is a phenomenon of discourse thought or of conscious word, it is the unity of word and thought (Vygotsky, 2001, p. 398).

If we focus on the analysis of meaning of the word in ontogenesis, we can observe that it consists of a

process in which the meaning of a word expands itself, and goes through alterations and changes throughout development. The meaning is the result of a system of relations that has become objective, and that has become possible in the course of history, that is, it is a more stable system of generalizations that is synthesized into one word, marking it fixedly for all people and thus leading to communication. Such system can have different nuances, depth, degree of generalization and reach for the objects it designates, but it preserves a certain permanent nucleus, or set of interconnections, even though it goes through semantical changes along history.

The author's preoccupation in revealing the dynamics of meanings in functioning language leads him to produce evidence of the signification of the word in the context of its use (Smolka & Góes, 1994; Góes, & Cruz, 2016). Thus, Vygotsky also conceptually adds the notion of meaning to this discussion – which would be closer to the personal dimension of the process. Signification is understood as a dialectic relation between meaning and sense, which emerges in social relations and that, later, are converted in the personal, intra-psychological plan (Pino, 2005). In the process of signification, words are in constant transformation and tension between what is perpetuated and what is stabilized. In other words, everything that refers to aspects related to a given situation and to the effective experiences of individuals regarding the word in its process of signification. Thus:

Signification, that is, the creation and the use of signs, is the most universal and fundamental human activity. It sets humans apart from animas from the psychological point of view (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 84). (...) In the higher levels of development, there are relations that are mediated by individuals. The essential characteristic of these relations is the sign ... A sign is always, initially, a means of social interaction, a way to influence others, and thus it becomes a way to influence oneself (Vygotsky, 1995, p. 83).

The process of signification – which comprehends meaning and sense, and is contradictorily social and subjective at the same time – becomes relevant in the different activities realized by a child – with or without disability. Thus, we can conclude that the systemic, semantic, and inter-functional dimension underlies and determines the production by Vygotsky on intellectual disability by defending that psychological functions are organized into systems that establish constant connections among themselves, and consolidate personality by means of the social context in which ideological processes appear.

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