

Finding the “prism”: Understanding Vygotsky’s *perezhivanie* as an ontogenetic unit of child consciousness

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Abstract

The concept of *perezhivanie*, Vygotsky’s “last word” on psychology, has been among the most difficult of his theoretical constructs to define and operationalise in research. Drawing on close analysis of key texts, this article identifies and examines three defining attributes of *perezhivanie* found throughout Vygotsky’s works. The attributes are: *perezhivanie* as a prism of psychological development, as a unit of human consciousness, and as intelligent perception of one’s environment. In contrast with common understandings of *perezhivanie* as “emotional experience”, privileging it as affect, this article highlights the intellectual basis of *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky’s writings with particular reference to his notions of “generalised” and “intelligent perception”. The article argues that *perezhivanie* is best understood, psychologically, as an intellectual gestalt reflecting the intellectualisation of perception and, ontologically, as an apperceptual “organ of selection” of consciousness and personality “refracting” the child’s individual social situation of development.

Key words

Perezhivanie; Vygotsky; intellect; ontogenesis; personality; consciousness; gestalt

... unlike other disciplines, paedology does not investigate the environment as such without regard to the child, but instead looks at the role and influence of the environment on the course of development. It ought to be capable of finding the particular prism through which the influence of the environment on the child is refracted, i.e. it ought to be able to find the relationship which exists between the child and its environment, the child's *perezhivanie*, in other words, how a child becomes aware of, interprets, and emotionally relates to a certain event. This is such a prism which determines the role and influence on the development of, say, the child's character, his psychological development, etc.

(“The problem of the environment”, Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 341)

Introduction

Of all Vygotsky's psychological constructs, the concept of *perezhivanie*—“experiencing”, or “lived through” or emotional experience—continues to elude clear conceptual and operational definition. The concept, introduced in a lecture some months before his death, was to be Vygotsky's “last word” (Iaroshevskii, 1997, p. 70) on psychology, coming after an intense two year period of rapid theoretical changes and revisions that saw the introduction of key child development concepts such as the social situation of development, the zone of proximal development, and neoformations (Yasnitsky, 2011). Vygotsky's early death meant that *perezhivanie*, as a key unit of child consciousness, remained “unfinished business” in his investigation of development of human consciousness in ontogeny (González Rey, 2007, 2009; Veresov, 2015a; Yaroshevsky, 1999).

Vygotsky's distinction between everyday (spontaneous) and theoretical (scientific) concepts (Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, pp. 167-241) provides a necessary starting point for understanding his concept of *perezhivanie*. The Russian word, *perezhivanie*, is derived from two root components *pere*, meaning “through”, and *zhivat* and *zhiv*, meaning “to live”. *Perezhivanie* therefore expresses an idea of “lived through” experience. In its everyday sense, “*perezhivat* meant to be alarmed, worried, upset; to suffer mental torment, to undergo some trial and survive it, having overcome the difficulties and troubles involved, to experience a state or feeling of and then outlive or vanquish it” (Vasilyuk, 1992, p. 9). Everyday understandings of *perezhivanie* are insufficient, however, as the word also acquired specialised meanings in Russian art and culture. Notably, it formed the theoretical core of the acting method of Vygotsky's contemporary, Konstantin Stanislavski, which strived “to replace the art of portraying emotions by the art of living these emotions (*perezhivanie*)” (Vygotsky, 1923, as cited in Michell, 2015, p. 24) by eliciting a deep onstage psychological connection between character, actor, and audience. Within Stanislavski's theoretical system, *perezhivanie* therefore acquired the specialised meaning of an actor's “emotional (re)experiencing” of character that “infected” audiences (Stanislavski, 2008). It is this drama, role-play notion of *perezhivanie* understood as “intensely-emotional-lived-through-experience” (Ferholt, 2010, p. 164) that is represented in research on children's play worlds (Ferholt, 2009, 2015). Arguably, this view of *perezhivanie* owes more to Stanislavski's theoretical system¹ than Vygotsky's, since it ignores the fundamentally different “scientific” purposes the concept plays in the respective systems of the two theorists (Michell, 2015). The premise of this paper is therefore that Vygotsky's *perezhivanie* needs to be understood as a key “scientific concept” (Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, p. 234) whose theoretical meaning is defined within his system of psychological concepts (Karpov, 2005).

Perezhivanie is increasingly being used in studies of experience ranging from young children's playworlds (Ferholt, 2009, 2015), lived experience of the everyday (Quiñones, 2013; Quiñones & Flear, 2011), family migration (Adams & Flear, 2015), emotional regulation (Flear & Hammer,

2013a, 2013b), human identity (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014a, 2014b; Nogueira, 2014), emotions in learning (Stone & Thompson, 2014; Vadeboncoeur & Collie, 2013), classroom discourse (Adams & March, 2014; Sannino, 2008), student academic engagement (Michell, 2012), art and drama (Connery, John-Steiner, & Marjanovic-Shane, 2010; Davis, 2015), language learning (Mok, 2015), science learning (Fleer, 2014; Schmidt, Lyutkh, & Shumow, 2012), assessment experience (Quiñones & Fleer, 2008), parent caregiver interaction (Brennan, 2014; Chen, 2015), and teacher cognition and learning (Cross, 2012; Dang, 2013; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Yang, 2015). Many of these studies emphasise the affective nature of *perezhivanie* as emotional experiencing without a clear connection to intellect or the development of human consciousness and personality. This affective privileging of *perezhivanie* may be attributed to researchers' application of the *Vygotsky Reader* editors' translation of *perezhivanie* as "emotional experience" in "The problem of the environment" (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994). Although the editors acknowledge its intellectual dimensions², their in-text translation "emotional experience" has become the standard meaning of the word.

This paper argues for an "intellectual" reading of *perezhivanie* in Vygotsky's works through his use of the "prism" metaphor, his focus on consciousness, and his notion of "intelligent" or "categorical" (Vygotsky, 1930-1931/1998b, p. 90), "generalised" or "meaningful perception" (1934/1987c, p. 190), which anticipated and framed the concept. Understanding *perezhivanie* involves a systemic analysis of Vygotskian texts relating the concept to its family of associated concepts within Vygotsky's evolving system of thought (Karpov, 2005; Veresov, 2015a), together with an historical analysis tracing the lines of theoretical development from the construct's earlier, embryonic conceptualisations. This textual approach to tracing the development of Vygotsky's thinking therefore attempts a textual hermeneutic that takes Vygotsky's words seriously (Gredler & Shields, 2004) and indeed mirrors the dynamic, developmental methodology Vygotsky himself applied to the study of changing psychological phenomena (Vygotsky, 1931/1997d).

The opening quote of this paper provides the starting point for examining Vygotsky's construct of *perezhivanie* and its web of related psychological concepts. The content of the excerpt is theoretically significant because of its link to the lecture's overall theme of explaining paedology's key task of investigating the role and influence of the environment on the course of child development, and its location and function in the immediate surrounding text. Coming where it does, the excerpt both synthesises key ideas about *perezhivanie* exemplified in the case studies of the preceding text and introduces the theoretical elaboration and application that follows.

From the quote, three key defining attributes of *perezhivanie* and their respective lines of theoretical development are identified, elaborated, and supported with reference to Vygotsky's writings. Firstly, Vygotsky's conceptualisation of *perezhivanie* as a prism highlights its "refracting", mediating role between child and environment and delineates its analytical value as a psychological system reflecting and revealing its personality and situation-specific aspects in a given social situation of development. Secondly, *perezhivanie* as a unit of consciousness involves an understanding of the key elements of the child's psyche—conscious personality, character, and new psychological formations—and their role in the process by which the environment influences (positively or negatively) the course of the child's development. Thirdly, the "intellectual" properties of *perezhivanie*, with its focus on the child's interpretation of, and relation to, the environment, are represented as a perceptual, meaning-oriented, sense-making process with emotional entailments, rather than emotional experiences per se. This paper now examines Vygotsky's *perezhivanie* in relation to these defining attributes with particular reference to "The problem of the

environment”, his evolving system of concepts, and related and antecedent notions from other relevant texts.

Perezhivanie as a psychological prism of ontogenesis

Understanding the attributes of the “prism” metaphor and its associated intellectual characteristics is key to understanding the nature of *perezhivanie*. The opening quote describes *perezhivanie* as a prism through which the child interprets, or “refracts” certain experiences in their environment, and through which the environment, in turn, influences their psychological development. The prism, then, is a metaphor of the key psychological structure that mediates the child’s consciousness of their environment, the interpreted meanings of their experiences and the subsequent influence of those meanings on the development of their personality. As a prism, *perezhivanie* is therefore a microcosm of child subjectivity and a developmental unit of the child’s psyche (personal consciousness).

Two key prismatic attributes underpin Vygotsky’s theorisation of *perezhivanie* in “The problem of the environment”, namely: a) the ontogenetic unity of the dynamic child-environment developmental system, and b) the psychological mechanism of refraction through which the environment influences the development of the child.

Regarding the first attribute, Vygotsky describes *perezhivanie* as constituting an “indivisible unity” of two characteristics—on the one hand, situational or environmental characteristics reflecting the nature of the situation being experienced, and on the other, personal or constitutional characteristics reflecting those aspects of personality salient to experiencing a significant event. Being an indivisible unity, the personal and situational characteristics of *perezhivanie* thus represent two sides of the same psychological coin. We can clearly see the two sides of *perezhivanie* presented in relationship with each other in Vygotsky’s famous description below—the situational (“that which is being *experienced*”, original emphasis) and the personal (“how I, myself, am *experiencing* this”, original emphasis):

Perezhivanie is a unit where, on the one hand, in an indivisible state, the environment is represented, i.e. that which is being experienced - perezhivanie is always related to something which is found outside the person - and on the other hand what is represented is how I, myself, am experiencing this, i.e., all the personal characteristics and all the environmental characteristics are represented in perezhivanie [original emphasis]... So, in perezhivanie we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of personal characteristics and situational characteristics which are represented in perezhivanie [emphasis added] (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 342)

Vygotsky uses exactly the same concept of the unity of personality and environment to describe *perezhivanie* as a unit of psychological development in “The crisis at age seven”, but without the prism metaphor:

A unity can be noted in the study of personality and environment. This unity in psychopathology and psychology has been called experience [perezhivanie]... experience [perezhivanie] is the unity of the personality and the environment as it is represented in development.... Experience [perezhivanie] must be understood as the external relation of the child as a person to one factor or another of reality. (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 294)

In this particular text, Veresov (2013, 2015a) draws attention to the important distinction in Russian between “unit” and “unity” in Vygotsky’s theorisation of *perezživanie*. As highlighted by Veresov (2013), “ ‘Unity’ is used when we speak about a complex whole, a complex system consisting of a number of parts, components, elements, etc” (p. 11), whereas “ ‘units’ represent such products of analysis which do not lose any of the properties which are characteristics of the whole, but which manage to retain, in the most elementary form, the properties inherent in the whole” (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 342). On the basis of this distinction, *perezživanie* can be viewed as an indivisible unity of a single complex developmental system of person-and-environment while at the same time being seen as an analytical unit of the complex whole of consciousness.

Turning to the “situational characteristics” side of the person-environment unity that is *perezživanie*, it is clear that the associated concepts “environment”, “relationship”, “relations”, and the “social situation of development” form a set of equivalent notions. So, finding the prism of the child’s *perezživanie* involves finding “the relationship which exists between the child and its environment” (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 341). As Veresov (2015a) has pointed out, Vygotsky’s statements about the child’s relationship with their environment refer specifically to his concept of the social situation of development. Defined as “nothing other than a system of relations between the child of a given age and social reality” (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998e, p. 199), the social situation of development refers to the unique, individual relationship between the child at a given age and their lived social environment:

At the beginning of each age period, there develops a completely original, exclusive, single and unique relation, specific to the given age, between the child and reality mainly the social reality that surrounds him. We call this relation the social situation of development at the given age. (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998e, p. 198)

Blunden (2011) advances our understanding of the social situation of development as the child’s social predicament that stimulates and structures individual emancipatory activity and development: “the social situation in which the child finds themselves constitutes a *predicament*, a predicament from which the child can only emancipate themselves by making a *development*” (emphasis in original, p. 464). A “social situation” then becomes a child’s “social situation of development” when the child, a) becomes aware of their social predicament; b) strives to free themselves from its confinements and contradictions, and c) initiates a process of personal self-transformation in the course of that striving:

The social situation of development is defined as a predicament because it is constituted as a kind of trap, from which the child can emancipate themselves only by a qualitative transformation of their own psychological structure and (what amounts to the same thing) the structure of those who are providing for their needs. Development means transforming the mode of psychological functioning and transcending the social situation of development (Blunden, 2011, p. 464)

The social situation of development thus involves the child in challenging and (re)negotiating their relational status quo, and engaging in active struggle to overcome their existing social situation, according to the personal perception and understanding (i.e., *perezživanie*) that frames the individual meaning and significance of their social situation. In this way, the child’s *perezživanie* mediates and realises the influence of the environment, as the source of development, on the psyche of the child:

it would be correct to say that the environment determines the development of the child through experience [*perezkhivanië*] of the environment.... the child is a part of the social situation, and the relation of the child to the environment and the environment to the child occurs through experience [*perezkhivanië*] and activity of the child himself; the forces of the environment acquire a controlling significance because the child experiences [*perezkhivaet*] them. (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 294)

Viewed as a whole, the social situation of development is a dynamic, developmental system that establishes and opens up a social-to-individual pathway for the child's psychological development. In this sense, it is a "kind of starting point of development of the child's higher forms of behaviour and consciousness" (Veresov, 2015a, p. 215):

The social situation of development represents the initial moment for all dynamic changes that occur in development during the given period. *It determines wholly and completely the forms and the path along which the child will acquire ever newer personality characteristics, drawing them from the social reality, as from the basic source of development, the path along which the social becomes the individual.* (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1932-34/1998e, p. 198)

We conclude then that the "situational characteristics" side of the person-environment unity of *perezkhivanië* refers to those social reality-oriented aspects of a developmental system in which the equivalent, dynamic concepts of environment, relationship, relation, and social situation of development are foregrounded.

It now remains to consider the "personal characteristics" side of *perezkhivanië's* person-environment unity. Here, Vygotsky focuses on the contributory role of particular aspects of the child's personality in constructing the personal meaning and significance of certain events in their environment:

Consequently, on the one hand, in experience [*perezkhivanië*], environment is given in its relation to me, how I experience [*perezkhivaet*] this environment; on the other hand, *features of the development of my personality have an effect.* My experience [*perezkhivanië*] is affected by the extent to which *all my properties and how they came about in the course of development participate at a given moment.* (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 293)

How paedology goes about determining the extent to which these properties of personality participate in *perezkhivanië* at a given moment is determined according to the "situational salience" of the child's constitutional characteristics. Only those personal characteristics that have played a key role in shaping the child's relationship to a given situation need be selected for consideration:

It is not essential for us to know what the child's constitutional characteristics are like per se, but what is important for us to find out is which of these constitutional characteristics have played a decisive role in determining the child's relationship to a given situation. (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 342)

Finding the personal-situational prism of the child's *perezkhivanië* therefore involves selecting only those personal and situational characteristics that are relevant to the given situation. Conversely, a child's *perezkhivanië* itself "helps us select those characteristics which played a role in determining the attitude to the given situation" (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 342). On the one hand, the person-situation prism of a child's *perezkhivanië* can be identified by finding those salient personal and

situational constituents that make up their *perezhivanie*. On the other hand, the child's *perezhivanie* itself can help identify personal (and situational) characteristics of the prism since they reflect the mobilisation of personality-specific characteristics in relation to particular events and crystallised socio-historical psychological production over time:

consequently, the constitutional characteristics of the person and generally the personal characteristics of children are, as it were, *mobilised by a given perezhivanie*, are laid down, *become crystallized with a given perezhivanie*, but at the same time *this perezhivanie does not just represent the aggregate of the child's personal characteristics* which determine how the child experienced this particular event emotionally, but *different events also elicit different perezhivanie*. (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 343)

When viewed according to the role personal characteristics play in development, we can say then that a child's *perezhivanie* is personality-specific. Specific aspects of the child's personality suggest particular personal experiences and events that elicited the child's *perezhivanie*. Conversely, when viewed according to the role situational characteristics play in development, a child's *perezhivanie*, is situation-specific. This situation perspective means that particular events in the child's social situation suggest the specific *content* of the child's *perezhivanie*. In this context, "finding the particular prism" (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 341) involves identifying the particular content of the child's *perezhivanie* within a given social situation of development. A child's *perezhivanie* is not content-free since "all experience is always experience of something. There is no experience that would not be experience of something just as there is no act of consciousness that would not be an act of consciousness of something" (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 294).

We therefore conclude that the personal characteristics side of the person-environment unity of *perezhivanie* refers to the child's individual subjective constructive aspects of their developmental system in which equivalent notions of personality, personal, and constitutional characteristics are foregrounded.

We turn now to consider the second attribute of the prism metaphor: the psychological mechanism of refraction used to describe *how* the child perceives and understands their environment and consequently *how* the environment influences the child's development. González Rey (2009) considers Vygotsky's use of the concept of refraction as a significant development in his thinking about the acting, self-developing subject as opposed to his earlier view of human psyche as a product or "reflection" of its environment:

"refraction" implies a recognition that the effect of any external event to the person's situation or process would depend on the individual's psychical organization and action in the ongoing process of a living experience. (p. 69)

For González Rey (2011), the idea of refraction indicates a reorientation towards the active, generative psyche of Vygotsky's first literary, creative period (1915-1927). This marked a break from the "reflecting" psyche of his cognitive, objectivist period (1928-1931), which focused on instrumental tool and sign-mediated operations of the higher psychological functions as internalised operations of external social processes, influenced by Lenin's doctrine of reflection (Au, 2007). González Rey argues that, with a renewed understanding of the acting subject implicit in the refraction metaphor, Vygotsky no longer viewed the child's psyche as a mere effect of its environment. Indeed, this understanding provided the necessary basis for the development of the

concept of subjectivity and subjective production, understood as “the emergence of emotional states that are not understandable only from the objective circumstances that influence the person from the outside” (González Rey, 2009 p. 69).

Even so, Vygotsky’s prism metaphor, with its associated notions of refraction and reflection, can be found in the earlier works of his so-called cognitive, objectivist period, where prism is used to describe the intellectualised character of developing higher psychological systems. Thus, thinking and speech are each described as prisms that transform child behaviour into higher, mental functions and behaviour. The social meaning of children’s goal-directed activity is “refracted through the prism of the social forms of his thinking” (Vygotsky, 1930/1999c, p. 20). Similarly, the volitional, affective behaviour of the young child is understood in terms of “action *reflected through the prism of thought* [that] has already been transformed into a different action, one that is meaningful, conscious, and consequently free and voluntary” (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1935/1993, p. 235). Likewise, development of childhood perception from visual to categorical (meaningful) perception is understood as “a fusion between concrete thinking and perception” where “we can no longer separate the perception of the object as such from its meaning and sense”. Consequently, “the typical course of the child’s development changes if we view this perception *through the prism of speech*, if the child not only perceives but tells about what is perceived” (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1932/1987b, pp. 299-300).

It is clear from these examples that Vygotsky found in the metaphor of the prism as a light-refracting body a concrete image of the inter-functional and transformational properties of the higher mental functions of thinking and speech as part of the developing, intellectualized, higher psychological systems he was trying to theorise. The prism metaphor from his instrumental, cognitive period has intellectual properties that are carried over into his theorisation of *perezkhivanie*. Significantly, during this period, Vygotsky variously described the psychological activity of the prism as either reflection or refraction. The alternation of the terms suggests the concept of refraction itself was in a state of flux at this time and not yet systematically articulated until its use in “The problem of the environment”.

The notion of refraction to describe how the human mind processes reality goes back even before his instrumental period. In his “The historical meaning of the crisis in psychology”, written in 1926, Vygotsky invokes the light-distorting properties of the prism to describe the basic selective filtering actions of human consciousness. His use of the language of refraction and explicit rejection of reflection in the following passage identifies consciousness as an “organ of selection”, a generative subjectivity that is more than the product of its environment. The subjective, refracting nature of psyche in this text anticipates the prism of *perezkhivanie* itself, and indeed offers an insightful reframing of the construct.

Our senses give us the world in excerpts, extracts that are important for us. Consciousness follows nature ...with blanks and gaps. The mind selects the stable points of reality amidst the universal movement...*It is an organ of selection, a sieve filtering the world and changing it so that it becomes possible to act* [emphasis added]. In this resides its positive role – not in reflection...but in the fact that *it does not always reflect correctly*, i.e., *subjectively distorts reality* [original emphasis] *to the advantage of the organism* [emphasis added]. (Vygotsky, 1926/1997e, p. 274)

It is this organ of selection that is echoed in the selective, “distorting”, self-interested, intellectual underpinnings of *perezkhivanie* described in “The problem of the environment”:

The child understands part of it, but not completely, he understands one side of the matter, but not the other, he understands the matter, but he understands in his own way, reworking and shaping it to suit himself, and selecting only certain parts of what has been explained to him. (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 345)

How then do we find the developmental prism of *perezkhivanie* within the real life worlds of children? As Vygotsky’s (1935/1994a) “straightforward” (p. 340) clinical case of three brothers living with an alcoholic mother (pp. 339-341) is the only example of diagnostic practice involving *perezkhivanie* available to us, close analysis is warranted. Vygotsky describes the nature, role, and influence of *perezkhivanie* in the reaction and development of three children who experienced the same external situation (an alcoholic, violent mother) but whose perceptions of this environment fundamentally differed according to their personal needs and social position within the family. The psychological impact of this situation on the youngest child was terror, depression, and helplessness; for the middle child, hate-attachment characterised by internal conflict and contradictory behaviour; while the oldest child, understanding his mother’s illness and the need to protect his younger siblings, developed a maturity and seriousness beyond his years. The cases illustrated that, although the boys experienced the same family environment (social situation), because of their different individual *perezkhivanie*, they each experienced an entirely different and unique social situation of development.

Table 1 presents a detailed analysis of the individual cases arising from their common social situation showing the relationship between each boy’s presenting symptoms, his given social situation of development, the selected personal and refracted situational characteristics of his individual *perezkhivanie* prism, and the ensuing psychological impact on his personality. The case study illustrates the nature of the boys’ different developmental outcomes from the same environment as a result of their individual “phenomenological prisms” (Esteban & Moll, 2014b, p. 75). From the case study, *perezkhivanie* constitutes each boy’s “affective construal” of his social situation.

Comparison of the case details in the table also highlights some gaps in important information on the “selected personal characteristics” side of the *perezkhivanie* prism. While the content of each boy’s *perezkhivanie* (i.e., his refracted situational characteristics) can be readily identified, it is apparent from the table that the specific contribution of each boy’s personality (i.e., his selected personal characteristics) to his individual *perezkhivanie* is unstated, and can only be inferred. It may be objected that the assumed child age-related needs inserted in the table owes more to Maslow’s (1954) generic age-based, hierarchy of human needs than to Vygotsky’s “completely original, exclusive, single and unique relation” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198) of situationally salient personal characteristics of the child’s *perezkhivanie*. Finding the person-situation prism of *perezkhivanie*, however, is an unavoidably iterative process of psychological deduction, constituting a “very complex” analysis “with tremendous theoretical difficulties” that “mandates a penetrating internal analysis of the experience [*perezkhivanie*] of the child, that is, a study of the environment which is transferred to a significant degree to within the child himself” (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 295). Such a complex investigation requires the application of all available, relevant psychological frameworks as methodological tools.

Table 1

Overview of clinical case study of three boys' *perezhivanie* living with an alcoholic mother

Case	Presenting symptoms (reaction situation)	Social development (child-environment relationship)	situation of	<i>Perezhivanie</i> prism		Influence of the situation on psychological development (conscious personality)
				Selected personal (constitutional) characteristics	Refracted situational (environmental) characteristics	
Eldest brother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> not a lively child with normal lively, simple interests appropriate to his age 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> early adolescence despite limited intellectual ability, understanding of the situation as family misfortune “special role” as senior member of the family duty to mitigate the misfortune and protect siblings 		[?]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pity for the mother, and siblings sense of responsibility for siblings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> disrupted development signs of precocious maturity, seriousness
Middle brother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> contradictory behavior simultaneous positive/negative (attachment-hate) attitudes to mother 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> school age some conscious understanding of the situation ambivalent attitude to the situation 		[attachment needs?]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> deeply pronounced conflict, internal contradiction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> disrupted development extremely agonizing condition, state of inner conflict Mother-witch complex
Youngest brother	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> neurotic (defensive) symptoms, terror attacks, enuresis, stammer, mute 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> pre-school age no understanding of the situation 		[security needs ?]	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> sense of incomprehensible, inexplicable horror, dread, fear 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> disrupted development state of defenselessness, helplessness, depression
General principle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying observable, behavioural symptoms 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> age level assessing child's degree of understanding, awareness, insight into the meaning of the situation (generalised perception, thinking) identifying the child's attitude to the situation 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> taking a person's constitutional characteristics (personality) into account 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> identifying inner attitude to the situation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> diagnosing resulting development of personality, character, dispositions
					<ul style="list-style-type: none"> how a child becomes aware of, interprets and emotionally relates to an event 	

The case study highlights the centrality of *perezhivanie* as the psychological mediator between the boys' situation and their ontogenesis, and the vital connection between their *perezhivanie* and their developed and developing personalities. The clinical nature of the case study whereby the researcher's attention is initially directed to the child's personality characteristics as a known presenting problem to be investigated and understood highlights the basic ontogenetic frame within which the biographical causal-deductive processes involved in finding the *perezhivanie* prism is pursued. From this ontogenetic perspective, the individual character of the boys' personalities is a historical-psychological *production* of their home environment as mediated by each boy's yet-to-be-identified individual *perezhivanie* prism. Conversely, when viewed from a microgenetic perspective, the yet-to-be-identified *perezhivanie* prism is an individual, historical-psychological *processor* of the boys' day-to-day lived experience of the mother, which provides the ontogenetic “raw material” for their psychological (personality) development.

This section has examined the *perezhivanie* prism as a unified, child-environment developmental system and emphasised its role in the ontogenetic development of the child's personality (psyche). We have seen how *perezhivanie* “describes how an individual experiences a situation, internalises meaning and uses that to guide future encounters” (Schmidt et al., 2012, p. 5) and constitutes the “phenomenological prism through which a person perceives and attributes values, senses and meanings” (Esteban-Guitart & Moll, 2014b, p. 75) to their lived environment. The refracting

function of the *perezhivanie* prism highlights its nature as a self-developing psychological structure, a reality-filtering and distorting “organ of selection” (Vygotsky, 1926/1997e, p. 274) that transforms a child’s significant microgenetic social experiences into ontogenetic formations of individual personality.

It is noteworthy that in all Vygotsky’s theoretical elaborations of *perezhivanie* as a person-environment prism of psychological development, there is no mention of affect or emotion. Given his long-standing theoretical preoccupation with the nature, history, development and dynamics of affect (e.g., Vygotsky, 1971, 1932/1987a, 1932-1934/1998d, 1932/1999a, 1931-1933/1999b), this omission can hardly be explained as oversight or sequestered thinking on his part. What is explicit in Vygotsky’s descriptions of *perezhivanie* as prism, however, are refracting “intellectual” qualities such as awareness, interpretation, insight, and attitude. These intellectual refractions, and their bases in the history, development, and significance of Vygotsky’s thinking about higher psychological functions, will be examined in detail in the later section on *perezhivanie* as intelligent perception of one’s environment. Before doing so, *perezhivanie* needs to be considered in the context of Vygotsky’s life-long investigation of human consciousness.

Perezhivanie as a unit of human consciousness

The “problem of consciousness” (Vygotsky, 1925/1997a; 1933-1934/1997f, p. 129) was central to Vygotsky’s moral purpose of developing a new scientific and emancipatory general psychology that realised the Marxist historical goal of creating a new socialist man for a new social order. As outlined in his 1930 paper, “The socialist alteration of man” (Vygotsky, 1930/1994b), consciousness as “internalized social relations” (Vygotsky, 1931/1997d, p. 106) was key to achieving humanity’s goal of gaining a true understanding of history that would enable it to change from being passive objects of historical forces to being free, self-conscious, self-determining agents of its own cultural historical development. For Vygotsky, therefore, child ontogenesis is essentially the history of the development of human consciousness in the child, and paedology is the field in which such development is investigated. His scheme of child development subsequently “offered an account of how the child, a biological organism, becomes first conscious, then self-conscious and finally achieves a scientific form of consciousness, as a consequence of living in culture” (Packer, 2008, p. 25). Development of human consciousness therefore provides the broad canvas for viewing the underlying coherence of Vygotsky’s emerging psychological system, and for locating and theorising *perezhivanie* within this system.

Perezhivanie therefore represents a significant moment in the history of Vygotsky’s investigation of human consciousness (González Rey, 2011; Zavershneva, 2014). Having identified “word meaning” as a unit of consciousness in the development of human thinking and speech, Vygotsky introduces *perezhivanie* as a unit of individual consciousness in the development of the complex psychological system of human personality (Veresov, 2015a). As shown below in a key text from “The crisis at age seven”, Veresov’s (2015a) corrections (in italics) to the English (mis)translation (in strike-through text) clarifies the meaning of Vygotsky’s original explanation of the relationship between *perezhivanie* as a *unit* of consciousness and the complex whole (*unity*) of the psychological system of consciousness, along with his careful distinction between this unit and the decomposed element of the higher mental function of attention:

Perezhivanie is introduced as a ~~unity~~ *unit* of consciousness, that is, a ~~unity~~ *unit*, in which the basic properties of consciousness are given as such, while in attention and in thinking, the

connection of consciousness is not given. Attention is not a ~~unity~~ *unit* of consciousness, but an element of consciousness in which there is no series of other elements, while the unity of consciousness as such disappears, and *perezživanie* is ~~the actual dynamics of the unity of consciousness, that is, the whole which comprises consciousness~~ *a dynamic unit of consciousness, which consciousness comprises.* (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 294)

This part-whole relationship between *perezživanie* and consciousness parallels the relationship between word meaning and consciousness. Vygotsky's use of similes and metaphors, "sun/droplet", "organism/cell", "cosmos/atom", [macrocosm]/ "microcosm" encapsulates this word meaning as a reflected unit of consciousness in the closing paragraph of "Thinking and speech":

Consciousness is reflected in the word like the sun is reflected in a droplet of water. The word is a microcosm of consciousness, related to consciousness like a living cell is related to an organism, like an atom is related to the cosmos. The meaningful word is a microcosm of human consciousness. (Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, p. 285)

There is a clear parallel therefore between the part-whole relations of *perezživanie* and consciousness, and "meaningful word" and consciousness. Such parallels suggest that the intellectual properties of word meaning as a unit of consciousness are also those of *perezživanie* as a unit of consciousness.

Vygotsky's concept of personality as the organ of human consciousness is crucial to an understanding of *perezživanie* as a unit of consciousness. Personality, as a dynamic socio-historical system of consciousness encompassing "the unity of behaviour that is marked by the trait of mastery" (Vygotsky, 1931/1997d, p. 242), is the larger organic psychical body of which *perezživanie* is a cellular part. In Vygotsky's scheme, personality, through *perezživanie*, is the ontological cause and result of the environment's developmental influence on the child. It provides an essential, ontological framework for understanding *perezživanie* as a unit of individual consciousness. In Vygotsky's scheme, personality develops ontogenetically as a single active-reflexive system of individual consciousness characterised by a supra-conscious self (Chaiklin, 2001; González Rey, 2002). Thus, Vygotsky identifies the emergence of personality in early childhood where the child becomes aware of itself as an acting "I" (Vygotsky, 1931/1997d, p. 248; 1932-1934/1998a, p. 266; 1932-1934/1998d). Later, after the age seven crisis, he identifies a differentiation between the social outer self and a private inner self leading to the beginnings of self-reflection (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 290). It is this meta-conscious, reflexive "I" that refracts, filters, and processes one's environment according to those personal characteristics represented in *perezživanie* according to "*how I, myself, am experiencing this*" (original emphasis, Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 342).

In this context, analysis of "The crisis at age seven" sheds new light on the concept of *perezživanie*. In this short text, the word, translated as "experience/s" (N. Veresov, personal communication, January 6, 2015), is used no less than fifty times. Content analysis of this text and "The problem of the environment" identifies much overlap in Vygotsky's theoretical explanation and illustrations of the concept. "The crisis" also presents a particular focus on the emergence in the child at this age of a new "experiencing of experience" where *perezživanie* is represented as a new consciousness and a new psychological formation (neoformation) of personality. Vygotsky identifies this neoformation as "self-evaluation" (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 292) an emergent

consciousness of personal experience made possible by an ability to generalise across one's own experiences as a result of the intellectualisation of one's mental functions. This development reflects a new intellectual orientation by the child to his own experiences, in which he "discovers the fact of his own experiences" (p. 291), in particular, his own emotions:

at the age level of seven years, we are dealing with the onset of the appearance of a structure of experience in which the child begins to understand what it means when he says: "I'm happy," "I'm unhappy," "I'm angry," "I'm good," "I'm bad," (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 291)

Vygotsky's (1932-1934/1998c) description of neoformations uses the same language and concepts used to describe the structure and features of *perezhivanie* itself. This suggests a close connection, if not identification, between the concepts of *perezhivanie* and neoformation as drivers of new consciousness of personality. Thus, the emerging neoformation at this age is an understanding, or sense, of one's own experiencing. It is due to this "intellectual perception" that "experiences acquire meaning (an angry child understands that he is angry) and because of this, the child develops new relations to himself that were impossible before the generalization of experiences". With the emergence of the neoformation of self-evaluation, a new reflexive relation between the child and the self is created—an inner and outer self, and "self-love as a generalized relation to himself"—enabling the child to develop self-concepts and self expectations with varying degrees of self-esteem and self worth (pp. 290-292). As Vygotsky concludes: "the level of our demands of ourselves, of our success, of our position, arises specifically in connection with the crisis at age seven" (p. 292). At the same time, the neoformation of self-evaluation involves a new unified relation between the personality and the environment, where "the environment determines the development of the child through experience of the environment" (p. 294). Thus, the neoformation of self-evaluation is a meta-awareness, appraisal and self-appraisal, reflecting a synthesis of intellect and affect, and a unity of environment and personality.

In Vygotsky's scheme then, *perezhivanie* is a unit of developing consciousness that describes a child's perception, interpretation, and appraisal of their experienced social environment *as it relates* to their personality characteristics. "The crisis at age seven" presents a picture of *perezhivanie* as new emergent age-related consciousness that reconstructs the child's sense and meaning of their own experiences and restructures the psychological needs and motives system of personality. In this context, *perezhivanie* is the emergent awareness of one's experience through sense-making of the environment and online interpretations of one's own unfolding experiences in response to this environment; it therefore involves consciousness of one's own experience, the "experience of experience". As a unit of developing consciousness, *perezhivanie* lies at the heart of this crisis of the psyche and the subsequent creation of the child's new social situation of development. The closing text of "The crisis" locates *perezhivanie* within this developmental landscape:

the essence of every crisis is a reconstruction of the internal experience [*perezhivanie*], reconstruction that is rooted in the change of the basic factor that determines the relation of the child to the environment, specifically, in the change in needs and motives that control the behavior of the child. Growth and change in needs and motives are the least conscious and least voluntary part of the personality, and in the transition from age level to age level, new incentives and new motives develop and undergo a reevaluation. (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 296)

This examination of *perezhivanie* as a unit of human consciousness has highlighted its intimate ties to Vygotsky's psychological system of personality, which encompasses "personal characteristics", character, and neoformations as driving forces of the child's developing consciousness. Although this system of concepts lends itself to theorising affective-emotional aspects of *perezhivanie*, the lack of explicit reference to affect or emotion in Vygotsky's discussion of *perezhivanie* is striking, particularly given his life-long interest in this area. Invoking the unity of human consciousness, affective readings of *perezhivanie* often refer to Vygotsky's axiom of the "indissoluble unity of intellect and affect" (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 233; 1934/1987c, p. 50) as a key attribute of *perezhivanie*. However, this unity means that emotions, as part of an inter-functional system under the influence of the higher mental functions, are themselves *intellectualised* in the course of their development (Vygotsky, 1993, p. 239). Within this inter-functional system, "our affects act in a complex system with our concepts" (Vygotsky, 1930/1997b, p. 103) and affect and intellect transform each other in development. In Vygotsky's scheme of psychological development, therefore, there is no emotion without intellect.

We now turn to an examination of key texts that show Vygotsky's line of thinking on the intellectual nature of *perezhivanie*. As will be seen, it is the intellectual rather than emotional aspects of the concept that are the focus of his theoretical attention.

***Perezhivanie* as intelligent perception of one's environment**

In Vygotsky's lecture, "The problem of the environment", the environment-mediating function of the child's *perezhivanie* is described in predominantly cognitive terms as "awareness", "interpretation", "insight", and "attitude" towards a given situation. These set of *perezhivanie* descriptors are encompassed by what Vygotsky calls "generalized perception" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, p. 190) or "intelligent perception" (Vygotsky, 1930-1931/1998b, p. 90), a term which, as we will see, has its origins in his thinking around language-mediated higher mental functions. This concept of intelligent perception, I now argue, describes the prism-refracting function of *perezhivanie*.

Perezhivanie's intellectual orientation is evident in the key role understanding plays in determining the child's relationship to the environment and the environment's subsequent influence on the child's development. Content analysis of the lecture shows this intellectual perspective is a dominant, recurring theme. Vygotsky offers a series of examples of the varying influence of the environment on children according to their relative understanding of adult speech at different ages; growing meanings about their expanding world as they develop (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, pp. 338-339); and their degree of understanding of life experiences and concepts, such as illness and death (p. 343). In relating this last example, Vygotsky, in a series of statements, theorises the role of such understanding in the child's *perezhivanie* and therefore the environment's influence on the child:

Clearly, a child who understands the meaning of death will react differently to this event than a child who does not understand anything of what has happened

...any event or situation in a child's environment will have a different effect on him depending on how far the child understands its sense and meaning.

The crux of the matter is that, whatever the situation, its [the environment's] influence depends not only on the nature of the situation itself but also on the extent of the child's understanding and awareness of the situation. (Vygotsky, 1935/1994, p. 343)

The previously examined case of the three brothers living with an alcoholic mother (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a) further exemplifies this perspective. The same environment influences each of the three boys differently through their different attitude (*perezhivanie*) to the situation. Key to understanding their differing attitudes, however, is their varying levels of understanding of their plight, reflecting their age differences. Thus, the youngest boy experienced the situation “as an *inexplicable, incomprehensible* horror which left him in a state of defenselessness” (emphasis added, p. 341). The second boy “was experiencing it *consciously* as a clash between his strong attachment and his no less strong feeling of fear, hate and hostility” (emphasis added, p. 341) to the mother. And the oldest boy, who “*already understood* the situation” (p. 340-341), “*understood that* their mother was ill” (emphasis added, p. 341), and “*could see that* the younger children found themselves in danger when their mother was one of her states of frenzy” (emphasis added, p. 341), apprehended the situation “as a misfortune that has befallen the family and which required him to put all other things aside, to try somehow to mitigate the misfortune and to help both the sick mother and the children” (p. 341).

Vygotsky concludes this part of the lecture by arguing the child’s degree of understanding of the situation is a critical factor in determining their interpretation (*perezhivanie*) of the situation and, consequently, the influence of the environment on the child. “Awareness”, “insight”, and “attitude” are all synonyms for the situational understanding that characterises *perezhivanie*:

...the influence of environment on child development will, along with other types of influences, also have to be assessed by taking the degree of understanding, awareness and insight of what is going on in the environment into account. If children possess various levels of awareness, it means that the same event will have a completely different meaning for them. (original emphasis, Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 343)

The environment exerts this influence... via the child’s *perezhivaniya* i.e. *depending on how the child has managed to work out his inner attitude to the various aspects of the different situations* occurring in the environment. The environment determines the type of development *depending on the degree of awareness of this environment which the child has managed to reach.* (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 346)

Vygotsky goes on to equate a child’s understanding of an experienced event with their ability to generalise, that is, think conceptually, about the meaning or personal significance of that event. Hence, children’s generalisations differ from adults: their different understandings are based on degrees of generalisation of word meaning (e.g., their understanding of family names); they have a partial, selective understanding of adult communication; and, at different stages of development do not yet possess a sufficiently comparable system of communication with adults:

children’s generalizations are different from ours and this in turn results in the well known fact that a child interprets reality, apprehends the events which are happening around him, not entirely in the same way as we do.

This means that a child at different stages of his development does not generalise to the same extent, and consequently, he interprets and imagines the surrounding reality and environment in a different way. Consequently, the development of thinking in children in itself, the generalisation in children in itself, is also connected with the way the environment influences them. (Vygotsky, 1935/1994a, p. 345)

The opposite also applies. Inability to generalise one's experiences prevents a true understanding of one's environment. Vygotsky (1935/1994a) relates how a child's inability to generalise certain negative experiences can prevent him from developing pathological responses to those experiences. An example is given of a severely deformed child's experience of frequent teasing and humiliation but whose inability to generalise those negative experiences actually protects him from trauma. For this child, "all this is like water off a duck's back because he is not capable of generalizing what was happening to him". Feelings of inferiority, sense of humiliation and damaged self-esteem "does not happen because he does not fully comprehend the sense and meaning of what is happening to him" (p. 344).

This example is repeated in Vygotsky's account of the development of new child consciousness in his "The crisis at age seven" (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c). Here, Vygotsky relates how a severely retarded child, although rejected and constantly teased at school, experiences "a thousand separate failures" but, unlike a normal child, suffers "no general sense of his worthlessness. He does not generalise what happens many times" (p. 290). Vygotsky goes on to explain that affective formations such as self-esteem depend on generalised thinking and reflect "generalization of feelings" (p. 290), "generalizations of experiences", or "affective generalization, logic of feelings", which appear at the beginning of the crisis at age seven (p. 292). Such generalizations arise from the development of a new consciousness where the child "is developing an intellectual orientation to his own experiences. Precisely as a three year old discovers his relation to other people, a seven year old discovers the fact of his own experiences" (p. 291).

From "The problem of the environment", it is clear then that the intellectual processes of understanding and generalisation, and their derivatives, awareness, interpretation, insight, and attitude, are quintessential attributes of *perezhivanie*. These attributes are encompassed by the terms "intellectual perception" (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 290) and "intelligent perception" (Vygotsky, 1930-1931/1998b, p. 90). Over the course of child development, intelligent perception is the end-product of the intellectualisation of perception, at the heart of which lies its core: "generalised perception" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, p. 190).

Generalised perception is "a higher form of internal mental activity", made possible through language-mediated abstraction, that enables the child "to perceive something in a different way" and therefore "acquire new potentials for acting with respect to it [this perception]" (Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, p. 190). The extract below highlights the action affordances of meaningful, generalised perception:

Meaningful perception is generalised or abstracted perception. Consequently, the transition to verbal introspection represents the initial generalisation or abstraction of internal mental forms of activity. This transition to a new type of internalised perception represents a transition to a higher form of internal mental activity. To perceive something in a different way means to acquire new potentials for acting with respect to it. At the chess board, to see differently is to play differently. By generalising the process of activity itself, I acquire the potential for new relationships with it. (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, p. 190)

Generalised perception, along with its equivalences and derivatives—meaningful perception, generalisation of experiences, generalisation of feelings, apperception, awareness, interpretation and insight—form the ideational template that frames the basic intellectual orientation of *perezhivanie* and places it within Vygotsky's scheme of intellectualisation of perception in child

development. The concept can be seen as an earlier, embryonic form of *perezhivanie*, in the same way that Vygotsky's concept of imitation anticipated the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD)³.

The intellectualisation of perception, or “how the processes of thinking and processes of perception merge” (Vygotsky, 1930-1931/1998b, p. 88), is a recurring theme throughout Vygotsky's account of the development of the child's higher mental functions. For Vygotsky, generalised, or “ordered”, “interpreted” or “comprehended” perception is a higher psychological system arising from the synthesis and transformation of elementary, visual perception with those higher psychological processes that mediate abstract, generalised thinking—language and thinking in concepts:

Ordered and comprehended perception, connected with thinking in words, is the complex product of a new synthesis in which visual impressions and processes of thinking are merged in a single alloy that can justifiably be called visual thinking. In contrast to the developed thinking of an adult, a child's thinking unites, orders and comprehends what is perceived entirely differently. (Vygotsky, 1930-1931/1998b, p. 88)

What is interpreted perception? In interpreted perception, I see in the object something more than is contained in the direct visual act, and perception of the object is to a certain degree an abstraction; traces of generalizations are contained in the perception. (Vygotsky, 1933-1934/1998a, p. 277)

As a synthesis of elementary visual perception and the higher mental functions of language and abstract thinking, generalised perception takes on and reflects the generalising attributes of the higher mental functions to which it is united:

Word meaning is always a generalization; behind the word is always a process of generalization. – meaning develops with generalization. (Vygotsky, 1933-1934/1997f, p. 136)

Isolated objects became connected because of thinking; they became ordered and acquired sense – a past and a future. Thus, speech leads to thinking about perception, to analysis of reality, to the formation of a higher function in place of an elementary function. (Vygotsky, 1930-1931/1998b, p. 88)

The merging of speech with visual perception produces further perceptual transformations. It transforms perception into selective, analytical perception that supports self-directed attention, as well creating the evaluative perceptual synthesis we call apperception:

...speech modifies perception. It directs attention to a certain aspect, extremely curtails the situation perceived, giving a kind of stenographic record of what is perceived. It automatically analyses what is perceived, breaking it down to objects and actions. Also, it synthesizes what is perceived, reflecting apparent connections in the form of spoken judgements.... Combining these words into judgement, he introduces a certain meaning into the perception. (Vygotsky, 1930-1931/1998b, pp. 87-88)

Characterised by abstract, generalised thinking, meaningful or intelligent perception is thus a synthesis of perception and language-based thinking in concepts. By its integration with language-

mediated thinking, perception becomes generalised. This process by which perception becomes generalised constitutes its intellectualisation:

We might say that only with the help of the word can a child recognize things and only with the help of a concept does he come to a realistic and intelligent perception of the object. (Vygotsky, 1930-1931/1998b, p. 90)

In short, a generalisation is made in each perception. To say that our perception is intellectual perception is to say that all of our perception is generalised perception (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, pp. 290-291)

We can say then that the intellectual orientation of *perezhivanie* is due to the intellectual nature of the higher mental functions, that is, language and abstract thinking, which intellectualises elementary perception and transforms it into a psychological system of generalised perception.

Vygotsky's repeated example of the generalised perception of experienced chess players is another thread that links the concept of *perezhivanie* with "intellectual perception" (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, pp. 290-291). The intellectual orientation of generalised perception is highlighted in the way chess players "see" the pieces on the chessboard. For the non-player, with no understanding of the game, the chessboard pieces can only be seen as random objects. For the player who understands the field of play, on the other hand, those same chessboard pieces are seen as meaningful configurations suggesting possible courses of action. The perceptions of the two players therefore are entirely different; the first experiences visual perception determined by the visual field of material objects before them, while the second experiences meaningful perception influenced by a conceptual and generalised understanding of the action properties and affordances of the chess pieces and their interrelationships:

The development of *intellectual perception* in man may be compared to how a child sees a chessboard or plays on it while just learning but not knowing how to play. The child not knowing how to play, may amuse himself with the chess pieces, sort them according to colour, etc. but the movement of the pieces will not be structurally determined. The child who learned to play chess will proceed differently.... *a good player can be distinguished from a poor player by the fact that he sees the chess field differently.*

We perceive the surrounding reality the way a chess player perceives a chessboard: we perceive not only the neighborhood of the objects or their contiguity, but also *the whole reality with its intellectual connections and relations.* (emphasis added, Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, pp. 290-291)

The field of the chessboard then represents the "surrounding reality" of the child's environment, the "whole reality with its intellectual connections and relations", and meaningful perception of this "life field" involves the child entering into a new relationship with himself through a new generalised awareness, or consciousness, of his own experiences:

Experiences acquire meaning (an angry child understands that he is angry) and, because of this, the child develops new relations to himself that were impossible before the generalisation of experiences. ...the whole character of experiences of the child is reconstructed at the seventh year the way the chessboard was when the child learned to play chess. (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, pp. 290-291)

Intellectual perception brings us back to the development of child consciousness. Vygotsky calls this new age-related awareness of self and environment the new “structure of consciousness” (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998e, p. 199), echoing his “semantic structure of consciousness” (Vygotsky, 1933-1934/1997f, p. 137). In acquiring such consciousness at a critical age turning point, “the child passes from one method of experiencing the environment to another” (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 295). In this transition, the changing nature of the child’s perception is central to developing a new consciousness at this age:

The new structure of consciousness acquired at a given age inevitably signifies a new character of perceptions of external reality and activity in it, a new character of the child’s perceiving his own internal life and the internal activity of his mental functions. (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998e, p. 199)

The “new character of the child’s perceiving his own internal life and the internal activity of his mental functions” express meaningful, “intelligent perception”. As a result, the child’s environment and their perceptions of that environment must change as they grow from one age level to another:

From the point of view of development, the environment becomes entirely different from the minute the child moves from one age level to another. Consequently, we may say that perception of the environment must change in the most substantial way (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 293)

Understanding *perezkhivanie* requires a re-examination and revaluing of its intellectual orientation that takes account of the antecedent, framing concepts found in Vygotsky’s writings in relation to the concept. Intelligent, intellectual perception, based on the notion of generalised perception, intellectualised through contact with the word, is central to this re-examination and understanding.

Conclusion: What is *perezkhivanie*?

For all Vygotsky’s explication and theorisation, *perezkhivanie* remains an ill-defined concept. González Rey (2015) concludes that *perezkhivanie* remained an explanatory rather than a descriptive concept and was not ontologically or psychologically defined. Veresov (2015b) seeks an approach to the problem of definition by drawing a basic distinction in Vygotsky’s texts between *perezkhivanie* as a concept and *perezkhivanie* as a phenomenon. To the question, “what is *perezkhivanie* ontologically and psychologically?”, our review suggests that Vygotsky’s (1926/1997e) “organ of selection” (p. 274), anticipating *perezkhivanie* with its selective, filtering, distorting prism-like action of consciousness, approximates an answer.

It is clear that Vygotsky’s texts relating to *perezkhivanie* support an intellectual reading of the concept⁴. A key argument of this review is that we understand the nature of *perezkhivanie* more clearly when we see it through the prism of intellect rather than the prism of emotion. As we have seen, the intelligent perception strand of Vygotsky’s work is a key that unlocks this understanding. The concept of intelligent perception has drawn attention to the intellectual basis of human perception and its perceptual field brought about by the intellectualising of elementary mental functions through mediation of the “impression-deforming” word:

When speech comes into play, his perception is no longer connected with the direct impression of the whole, new centres fixed by words and connections of various points

with these centres arise in the visual field; perception stops being the “slave of the visual field” and independently of the degree of correctness and completeness of resolution, the child perceives and transfers an impression deformed by the word. (Vygotsky, 1930/1999c, p. 12)

In the idea of intelligent perception, we can also see the influence of Gestalt psychology, a school of research founded on investigating perception of structured wholes (*Gestalten*), propounding field theories of holistic perception of the environment. In his discussion of *perezhivanie*, Vygotsky describes our experience of meaningful perception of the world of objects in gestalt-like terms: “we realize the perceived complex of impressions simultaneously and together with external impressions”, while our perception of objects is “experienced as a single act of realization” (Vygotsky, 1932-1934/1998c, p. 290). Likewise, Vygotsky invokes the theory when explaining the perceptual fields of chess players in *Gestalt* terms: “an essential trait of perception is [its] structural [*gestalt*] quality, that is, perception is not made up of separate atoms, but represents an image within which there are various parts” (p. 291).

Vygotsky’s work was influenced, in shared approaches and methods, by frequent interaction with members of the Gestalt school, most notably, Kurt Lewin (Yasnitsky, 2012a, 2012b, 2015). Like Vygotsky, Gestalt psychologists considered consciousness as a prime object of study (Yasnitsky, 2014). Like Vygotsky,

gestalt psychologists proposed research that would focus on the study of wholes, rather than atoms and elements, and considered human being as an organism, an indivisible biosocial unity, rather than a mechanism that can be reduced to a sum of its components, functions and processes (Yasnitsky, 2014, p. 730).

However, it is also clear from his writings that Vygotsky was engaged in a sustained polemic with Gestalt psychology around the key issue of its static notion of perception in contrast with his dynamic view of its intellectualisation and development as a language-mediated higher mental function (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1991)⁵. There was also a second area of criticism based around fundamentally different conceptions of gestalt itself. As Blunden (2011) noted, Vygotsky appropriated concepts of structural (Gestalt) psychology but his view of what constituted a gestalt was larger than that of Gestalt psychology. Whereas for Gestalt psychologists, *Gestalt* described a framework of an individual organism analysing a perceptual field—a formation of the psyche “inside the head”—for Vygotsky, Gestalt “referred to a whole individual organism *together with the field of social activity* of which they are a part” (original emphasis, Blunden, 2011, p. 460)—a formation of the psyche “outside the head”. Vygotsky’s Gestalt therefore encompassed the totality of the “organism with its received environment”—that is, the social situation of development:

Vygotsky conceived of the gestalt not just as a brain structure or scheme of perception, but *as a system of social relationships and activity*, which included the person in the social situation through which the person’s needs are met. (emphasis added, Blunden, 2011, p. 463)

Through the concept of the social situation of development, with the relations by which the child’s needs are met, seen equally as bonds enslaving them, Vygotsky *grasped the social life of the child as a concept, as a gestalt* (emphasis added, Blunden, 2011, p. 465)

This “grasping” by the organism of the totality of its life situation is the core concept of *perezhivanie*. Just as *perezhivanie* is the concept (*Gestalt*) with which the child grasps the meaning of their social

situation of development, so the social situation of development is the concept (*Gestalt*) with which the researcher grasps the situated dynamics of the child's development. It is from this perspective that Vygotsky found Gestalt psychology's individualistic, microscopic notion of *Gestalt* wanting, prompting his criticism that "having smashed atomism, [Gestalt psychology] replaced the atom by the independent and isolated molecule" (Vygotsky, 1934/1997c, p. 230).

This understanding leads us to the view that *perezhivanie* is a child's intellectual gestalt of their experienced life world. Psychologically, it is a holistic intellectual-affective appraisal, or image, of a social predicament at a certain age and moment that initiates the child's striving to overcome the confinements of the present social situation and, with this striving, comes formative life experience and the development of personality. This view accords with Vasilyuk's (1992) description of experiencing as the "direct sensation or experience by the subject of mental states and processes" (p. 22), a kind of effortless, reverse-apprehension where the content of one's relation to the world is given to the subject as a gestalt:

experiencing is a special, subjective, partial reflection, and a reflection, moreover, not of the surrounding real world *per se*, but of the world in its relation to the subject, as regards the possibilities it offers for satisfaction of the subject's immediate motives and needs. (Vasilyuk, 1992, p. 22)

This understanding of *perezhivanie* as an intellectual gestalt is found in key research. In presenting a comprehensive cultural psychology approach to analysis of emotion and theories of emotion, Clará (2015) identifies *perezhivanie* with the emotion concept of appraisal, or mental representations of one's relationship with the environment:

The descriptions offered by appraisal theorists suggest that appraisals are representations of the relationship between the subject and the environment, or to be more precise, representations of how the environment affects the subject. (p. 46)

Vygotsky's *perezhivanie* is defined "as a holistic representation of the relation between the environment and the subject (me-in-the environment)" (Clará, 2015, p. 46) and his conception of "appraisal/*perezhivanie*" (p. 48) is seen as a representational tool in activity mediating the *effects* of the environment (as the object of activity) on the *affects* of the person (as the subject of activity). Within this activity framework, Clará offers his own definition of *perezhivanie* as "appraisal-mediated feeling" (p. 52). This interpretation highlights the holistic, gestalt-like character of *perezhivanie*, but one fused with higher intellectual functions, such as representational, supra-conscious, evaluative thinking and feeling.

Appraisal-based emotion research also highlights the key role of *perezhivanie*-like, cognitive gestalt structures in the formation and development of emotional states. Building on Frijia's (1993) appraisal model of emotion, Lewis (1996) outlines a non-linear, dynamic systems model of self-organising appraisals, which "specifies reciprocal causation between cognitive interpretations and emotional responses as the source of growth, and consistency in self-organising appraisals" (p. 9). In the model, self-organising appraisals are appraisal-emotion gestalts, holistic interpretative structures that coalesce from feedback between cognition and emotion and which in turn guide emotional responses that then reinforce the interpretative gestalt. Thus, a dynamic system emerges whereby "cognitive appraisal events elicit emotions that generate further cognitive activity" (p. 11):

These appraisals are *global interpretations of situations* that correspond with particular emotions. They are assembled over time, in an emergent fashion, rather than retrieved from memory or biologically pre-specified. *Appraisals self-organise when an emerging interpretation guides an emotional response that amplifies and crystallises that interpretation.* (emphasis added, Lewis, 1996, p. 11)

We conclude therefore that *perezhivanie* is a generative, developing system of consciousness in which the child's whole personality is vitally engaged in the reflective activity of interpretative perception and sense-making of their lived social environment. A person's experiencing of the environment necessarily involves a mental representation of that environment. This amalgam of experience with the representation of that experience characterises the nature and structure of *perezhivanie*. As a psychological system, a person's *perezhivanie* is a gestalt-like construal and appraisal of one's lived social position within one's field of social relations engendering motives for action. Because of its evaluative, appraisal character, *perezhivanie* reflects an emergent supra-situational consciousness, a holistic representation, of one's relation to one's lived environment. It is this reflexive, language-mediated, evaluative nature that determines its intellectual character as an apperceptual prism of child consciousness. Hopefully, this understanding of Vygotsky's *perezhivanie* will help researchers "find the prism" needed to advance our application and exploration of the concept.

¹ Some commentators (e.g., Ferholt, 2010) assume that Vygotsky appropriated the concept from Stanislavski.

² They also provide the following translation in footnote 1 to the text: "the Russian term serves to express the idea that one and the same objective situation may be interpreted, perceived, experienced or lived through by different children in different ways. Neither 'emotional experience' (which is used here and only covers the affective aspect of the meaning of *perezhivanie*), nor 'interpretation' (which is too exclusively rational) are fully adequate translations of the noun' (van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994, p. 354). See also the translation of *perezhivanie* in editors' note 59 of *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky, Vol. 3* (1997): "Vygotsky uses the word 'perezivanie' which means 'experience' or 'interpretation'. 'Perezivanie' covers both the way an event is emotionally experienced and the way it is cognitively understood by the subjects." (p. 390)

³ From "imitation" as a distinctly human cultural capacity to ZPD as a zone of imitative possibility, see Vygotsky, 1934/1987c, p. 280.

⁴ Vygotsky's student, Lydia Bozhovich, rejected the "intellectualism" of Vygotsky's *perezhivanie*. She developed an affect-based theory of personality—without *perezhivanie*—reconceptualising it primarily as a unconscious system of needs and motives (Bozhovich, 1979, 2004a, 2004b, 2004c, 2004d, 2009). For a critique of Bozhovich's criticism, see Blunden, 2014.

⁵ See editor's note 9, "Kurt Lewin", pp. 320-321, in *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky, Vol. 5* (1998), and note 2 to the Russian edition, p. 384-385 *The Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky, Vol. 1* (1987).

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