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A common characteristic of Vygotsky's first defectological writings is the emphasis on the possible social education of "defective" children and on their potential for normal development. He argued that every bodily handicap - be it blindness, deaf-muteness, or a congenital mental retardation - first and foremost affected the children's position in "the collective", rather than their direct interactions with the physical surroundings. Thus, parents, siblings, and peers will treat the handicapped child very differently from the other children, be it in a positive or negative way.

Starting from this premise Vygotsky reasoned that social education, based on the social compensation of their physical problems, was the only road towards a satisfactory life for "defective" children. Emphasizing the fact that these children were for 95 percent healthy and had a potential for normal development he passionately pleaded to pull down the walls of the special schools, to have them participate in the komsomol, and to train them for participating in normal fulfilling labor activities. Participating in the pioneer movement the deaf-mute and blind children would live and feel like the rest of the country, and their pulses "would beat in unison with the pulse of the huge masses of the people". Echoing the general rhetoric and pathos of the twenties Vygotsky even claimed that "the social education that arose in the greatest epoch of the final reform of mankind is called to realize that of which mankind has always
dreamt as a religious miracle: that the blind would see and the
deaf would hear". Elsewhere, he asked the reader to imagine a
land where blindness or deaf-muteness were highly valued. In such
a country these handicaps would not exist as a social fact. In a
similar way, the inclusion in the social collective, the turning
of handicapped children into socially valued workers, would
eliminate the idea of defectiveness as a social fact in the new
society.

Reading Adler

Vygotsky's initial ideas about the integration of
"defective" children in society through the participation in
social collectives were quite general. It was only in 1927 that
his views on defectological problems became somewhat more
specific. Under the influence of the third edition of Adler's
"Praxis und Theorie der Individualpsychologie" (Adler, 1927) he
now started elaborating the notion of compensation and even
supercompensation of children's physical defects.

Adler had observed that we cannot really understand a
person's behavior unless we know its function and purpose. All
organisms strive after a certain goal and the task of the
psychologist is to find this goal. It is only after having found
the imaginary line that can be drawn through the different
aspects of an organism's behavior that this behavior will start
to become intelligible to the observer. The imaginary line unites
all different aspects of behavior - makes the organism into an
individual - and points like an arrow to some future goal. This
idea of goal-directedness or finality of behavior Adler opposed
to the idea of causality and reflex chains. Reasoning that the
sole knowledge of the causes of behavior would never allow us to understand its unity and future course he argued for the functional, goal-directed point of view. Without the guideline of the directional goal the organism would not be able to "master the chaos of future" and all action would be a blindly "groping around" (Adler, 1927, p. 2). Knowing a person's intentions, however, one can more or less predict his or her behavior, Adler reasoned. To argue this view he gave the example of a man wishing to commit suicide. Knowing his goal it is quite easy to foresee that he would reply with the word "rope", when asked to quickly respond to the word "tree". But without this knowledge of his intentions it would be virtually impossible to predict the answer. All psychological phenomena, therefore, should be understood as the preparation for some future goal. Adler went on to posit that the - mostly unconscious - goal of all persons is to be superior to others and to reach a superior position in social life. This striving to be superior - or God-like in Adler's terms - is in itself ridiculous, but suffices to explain the actions of individuals and their development. Each inability or incapacity is subjectively felt as a serious barrier on the road to perfection that should be overcome at all costs. This is in particular true for children who are surrounded by adults who surpass them in almost every possible area. The feeling of inferiority to adults is the child's most powerful motive to develop, Adler (1927, p. 9) argued. More important than their real capabilities - which may be relatively poor or excellent - is their subjective assessment of them, which takes mostly the form of a feeling of inferiority. Both handicapped and normal children are motivated by the single goal to become adult-like, and later - having become adults themselves - to become God-like.
They are constantly striving for the future perfection, a future that will compensate them for their presently felt inferiority. The whole possibility of the child’s upbringing and development depends on this feeling of inferiority (Adler, 1927, p. 9).

Characteristic for Adler, then, was the positing of a striving for perfection that was caused by an initial feeling of inferiority and in its turn was evoked by very real differences between children and adults. In chapter seven of his book he summarized this idea by saying that one can deduce "... a psychological law of the dialectical leap from organ inferiority through the subjective feeling of inferiority to the psychological striving for compensation or supercompensation" (Adler, 1927, p. 57). The result of the striving for compensation might be successful - calling into life normal development or even superior development - or might result in failure. In the latter case neuroses - which Adler, thus, considered to be unsuccessful attempts at compensation for felt inferiority - would develop.

Integrating Adler

In several ways this theory harmonized with Vygotsky's earlier ideas regarding the problems of defectology. First, Adler's view was moderately optimistic in that it posited that inferiority ("defects") might be overcome, and that the struggle for compensation might even result in supercompensation. Second, Adler's emphasis on the struggle for a social position was at least compatible with the view that for "defective" children it was of vital importance to attain a position in the "collective" or society as a whole. Third, Adler's idea of social struggle Vygotsky found compatible with the thinking of Darwin and Marx.
In his opinion Adler was right in positing that it is precisely the state of not being adjusted that causes species or individuals to develop and leaves potential for development and education. Fourth, Adler’s theory de-emphasized the idea of an organic disposition for inferiority, underlining the idea of future compensation. Elaborating on this theme he called his own theory a "positional" theory - because of the emphasis on social position - as opposed to the "dispositional" theories that stressed organic dispositions (Adler, 1927, p. 56). Similarly, Adler’s future-oriented theory formed a welcome alternative to Freud’s emphasis on the relevance of past experience.

These and other ideas were enthusiastically welcomed by Vygotsky. At first he particularly liked the idea that the compensatory tendencies would automatically, naturally originate in the "defective" child. The defect in itself formed the primary stimulus for the development of the personality and the educational process could make use of these natural tendencies. Thus, in 1927 he exclaimed “What a liberating truth for the pedagogue: the blind develops upon the failing function a psychological superstructure, that has a single task - to replace vision; the deaf with all means develops means to overcome the isolation and seclusion of muteness! ... [We] did not know that a defect is not only psychological poverty, but also a source of richness, not only weakness, but also a source of strength”.

There is no doubt that Vygotsky at first fully believed in the existence of (super-)compensation and in the correctness of Adler’s view on these matters. Giving the example of vaccination and the resulting "superhealth" of the child he claimed that supercompensation by the organism was a omnipresent phenomenon in
biology that had been scientifically established beyond any reasonable doubt. He did realize - again following Adler - that for "defective" children the attempts to compensate for a defect might lead to failure, but stressed that the possibility of supercompensation in itself showed, "like a beacon", the road educational efforts should take.

Conclusions

Despite these affinities Vygotsky's flirtation with Adler's theory would soon come to a full stop. Part of his growing disinterest had a purely scientific background. Vygotsky started doubting, for instance, the "automatic" nature of the process of compensation. Other reasons for the unhappy ending of this love affair should be sought in the growing ideological pressure in the late twenties. In his writings of 1927 and 1928 Vygotsky had still noted that Adler was active in the socialist movement and had mentioned his references to the writings of Marx and Engels. Repeating approvingly Adler's lines about the "dialectical leap" (quoted above) he had argued that individual psychology was dialectical. It was dialectical for its claim that defects would result in their opposite and for its emphasis on the continuous development towards a future goal. However, in 1929 this type of assessment had become increasingly unpopular and Freud's and Adler's theories were severely criticized in the leading Soviet journals. Vygotsky too, now noted idealist tendencies in Adler's work and soon the German psychiatrist's name disappeared from his defectological writings. For some period his ideas remained - like the forgotten shadow of a person removed from a photograph - but gradually these too disappeared without a trace.