RECEPTION OF PIOTRYA. GAL'PERIN'S IDEAS IN THE WEST\(^1,2\)

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Summary.—A review of the references to the works of the Soviet scholar Piotr Ya. Gal'perin revealed the inadequacy of the reception of his contribution to psychology in the West. He is usually referred to as the author of concrete instructional techniques whereas in actual fact his work was much broader in scope and encompassed original contributions to fundamental problems of psychology.

The Soviet psychologist Piotr Ya. Gal'perin (1902-1988) belonged to the “Golden Age” of Soviet psychology which brought forth such brilliant psychologists as Vygotsky, Luria, and Leont'ev. However, unlike his colleagues, he and his writings received less and inadequate attention in the West. Knowledge of his work is limited to educationalists who refer to his theory of the so-called “stepwise formation of mental acts” which was widely applied in the education and training of children and adults both in the Soviet Union and in the West. It is less known that Gal’perin was an outstanding theoretician who developed a fundamental theory about the origin of concrete psychological processes and the general laws and regularities of mental development. Sharing with Vygotsky the same cultural-historical background in psychology, he nevertheless propounded his own approach towards these issues.

As part of our project concerning the reception of Gal’perin’s theory in the West we carried out a systematic search for references to Gal’perin’s works in journal publications in Western European languages from 1972 until 1992 (using Social SciSearch, Social Sciences Citation Index). The total number of references was 168 (81 in English, 68 in German, 6 in Dutch, 5 in Finnish, 4 in Spanish, 2 in Swedish, 1 in Italian, and 1 in Portuguese). The majority of these publications dealt with concrete aspects of children’s formation of certain skills (reading, writing, drawing, counting, etc.). They referred to Gal’perin's works as the source of a concrete instructional technology. Fourteen works referred to Gal’perin as the author of a theory concerning broader matters (formation of mental activity) but these, as well, mainly considered his approach to be an effective teaching-learning theory. Only in 8 publications (3 of them in English, 3 in German, and 2 in Dutch) was Gal’perin’s contribution to the basic problems of psychology analyzed.

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It is, of course, exceedingly difficult to explain the development of scientific reputation (cf. van der Veer & Valsiner, 1994). One reason for the one-sided reception of Gal’perin’s legacy in psychology is that until recently few of his works dedicated to the fundamental questions of psychology had been translated into Western languages (cf. the special issues of Soviet Psychology, 1989, and Journal of Russian and East European Psychology, 1992). Another reason lies, rather paradoxically, in the effectiveness of the instructional techniques derived from his theory of the formation of mental acts. Researchers have concentrated on the instructional aspect of the formation of mental acts so the fundamental psychological background eluded thorough consideration. Therefore, the general theoretical laws of mental development formulated by Gal’perin were perceived as concrete instructional principles and his psychological theory began to be treated as a mere pedagogical method. This often led to misunderstanding of Gal’perin’s theory with respect to both general assessment and educational applications.

Gal’perin’s viewpoints on the basic problems of psychology (a set of ideas, which is much broader than the theory of stepwise formation of mental acts usually associated with his name) could be called the theory of the formation of orienting activity because he regarded psyche as a form of the subject’s activity which fulfills the function of orientation in an ever-changing environment. This theory has four basic parts: (a) a conception of the origin of psyche and the subject matter of psychology, (b) propositions about phylogenetic and ontogenetic regularities of mental development, (c) a theory of the stepwise formation of mental activity, and (d) an analysis of concrete psychological processes (memory, attention, thinking, emotions, etc.) as different forms of orienting activity. Together these parts make up a holistic perspective which could help modern psychology to elucidate several of its most intricate problems. In the near future we plan to illustrate the applicability of Gal’perin’s ideas to some fundamental psychological issues.

REFERENCES

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