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Contemporary Russian Psychology in the Context of International Science

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Abstract

Russian psychology faces a challenge to join international science after decades of isolation. With respect to this issue, contemporary Russian professional community is substantially diversified, and we can trace both "globalist" (integrative) and "counter globalist" (isolationist) tendencies. The question of "the optimum integration" is very debatable. It is argued that seeking for "the optimum" it is necessary to consider theoretical orientations of scientists, as diverse methodological grounds and predilections of contemporary Russian psychologists bring forth a diversity of attitudes to integration with the mainstream. A classification of theoretical dispositions prevalent in contemporary Russian professional community is presented.

Keywords: Russian psychology; international science; Activity theory; Christian Orthodox psychology; psychology in Russia in Post-soviet period.

1. Introduction

The question of the place of Russian psychology in international science and concomitant issues of integration of the former into the global mainstream is a key point today for professional self-identity of Russian psychologists, who from the very beginning of their professional education are actively assimilating the mainstream product, while at the same time, the vast majority of them are able to speak and write only in Russian. The more so that official evaluations of the quality of work of Russian scientists are more and more determined by the presence or absence of their publications in foreign scientific journals and reference systems. The adequacy of such evaluation criteria raise debates among Russian psychologists and demand analysis which is presented in a large number of publications [1], [2], [3], [4], [5], [6], [7], [8], [9], [10], etc.

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Yurevich notices that among Russian psychologists today both "globalist" (integrative) and "counter globalist" (isolationist) tendencies can be observed: "Straightforward orientation to Western standards, prescribing Russian science erasing national specificity comes along side with the same straightforward denial of the need to adjoin to the world mainstream " [8, p.55]. Moreover, at present "counter globalist" tendencies in the Russian psychological science are strengthening: "The most radical of these show up, for example, in statements, that we need not seek to join the Western science - on the contrary, the latter should pay more attention to the Russian science; that we should not learn foreign languages to be published in international journals, but on the contrary, foreign scientists should learn Russian to read Russian scientific journals, etc.” [8, p.55].

We agree with the conclusion of Yurevich that "the obvious inadequacy of both two extreme positions and the need to preserve most prolific national features of Russian science on one hand and on the other hand, the need of integration into the global mainstream, makes feasible the compliance of the principle of optimum integration” [8, p.55]. But what should be this optimum, what issues should be considered in order to define this optimum? This remains debatable, and this we would like to discuss here.

2. Contemporary professional community is diverse and thus vary the attitudes to integration

Who and why seeks or evades integration into international science among diverse contemporary Russian professional community? What motives bring forth the "globalist" and "counter globalist" tendencies? Let us try to reveal groups in our professional community where attitudes of the participants to the integration are more or less the same. Our assessment we shall base on the analysis of theoretical grounds and predilections scientists share. To reveal those let us consider the situation in which contemporary psychological community has been formed.

Contemporary Russian professional community formed on the remains of the paradigm of Soviet psychological science. Soviet psychology had been, in a measure forcibly, kept within the framework of a mono methodological trend, oriented to standards of natural sciences and based on Marxist philosophy, with a priority of fundamental research. During the Soviet period psychological practices were restricted and research centers were scares. There were only few units providing applied psychological research in big clinical centers, in war industry central institutions, etc. Universities were the main centers providing psychological research and education, and there were only three universities in Russia (eight all together in the USSR), where psychology faculties were: Moscow (MSU), Yaroslavl (YarSU), and Leningrad university (LSU). University faculties were more research centers than educational institutions, say, LSU recruited each year about 50 full-time students, YarSU was smaller, MSU recruited a bit more than a hundred. All education was free, the entrance on a competitive basis. There were fully equipped laboratories, where all the students got profound training. And these faculties were doing research for the government, very well financed. The faculties and the departments were headed by well-known researchers who maintained the investigations for which the faculties got their money from the state.

When perestroika began governmental support of science and education was seized. Researches had to find some new sources for living. Many Russian specialists in mathematics and physics went abroad. For psychologists this appeared to be not so easy because of the language barrier and because of their specific theoretical background. But another powerful source of finance sprang up: the "customer demand" for practical psychology. Three product areas opened where psychologists were called for and very well paid:

- Politics. Politicians believed that psychologists could help them to exert influence upon the voters and to win elections.
- Young Russian business. New businessmen believed that psychologists could help them to sell their products and to raise labor productivity.
- And the main one - psychological education. People were interested in psychology. They believed that it could help them to get reed of their stresses and inner conflicts and to be influential. Psychological education became very popular, and it was provided at all levels, from short time courses up to university diplomas.
So, psychology has been boosted in Russia since “Perestroika”. The number of graduated psychologists has increased dramatically. In 2003 there were about 300 institutions of higher education in psychology in Russia and about 5,000 students graduated annually. You can guess that these universities were very different from the old ones. The “old” University faculties also changed to meet the situation: now they were making money not on fundamental research, but on "educational services".

Totalitarian government during the Soviet period had treated psychology as a gardener shaping his tree: letting only those branches grow which fitted the plan. Any deviation was illegible. With the fall of the Soviet state ideological barriers to the development of Russian psychological science were removed. Many of older psychologists were just tired of sticking to the old “rules”. Most rapidly developing areas of contemporary Russian psychology were those which had been being virtually abandoned during the Soviet period: counseling psychology, social psychology etc. Naturally, Western psychological theories were generally recognized and widely employed. Lots and lots of textbooks translated into Russian had no references to Russian authors whatsoever. The majority of the newly graduated psychologists had little knowledge of what the theoretical basics of Soviet Psychology were and no interest to know about it. Thus, the majority of the contemporary Russian psychological community does not share the paradigm, which prevailed in Soviet psychology, at all.

What part of the contemporary professional community masters theories of Soviet psychology? A very small one. That knowledge was transmitted directly from teachers to students, mainly by oral tradition. There were no tutorials and classbooks for future psychologists during the Soviet period. Studies were based on monographs and papers, which were written in "Aesopian" language. The texts of our classics require hermeneutics, require reading together with the teacher. That theory is mastered today by a very small part of the professional community, by those who have been appropriately trained and educated. Moreover, not all of these people still cling to the old theoretical positions, so that this group size gradually decreases.

However, the first group, which we denote here, is a group of the followers of the Soviet psychology traditions, let us call it the “Activity theory (AT) trend”, as this is the most frequently used label for Soviet psychology in the international mainstream. This group is not numerous, but that does not diminish its significance in the context of the problem being discussed.

What other groups should be singled out?

In the 90's when the collapse of the Soviet psychology paradigm occurred, against a combination of processes of blurring of boundaries between the national and the global science, and those of disintegration of the national professional community, a focus on foreign theories dominated in Russian psychology. Scientists who cling to mainstream theories we shall call here "Westerners" and we assign them to a particular group, the second one in our analysis.

As for authentic trends that have been developed in Russia in the post-perestroika period, we can denote Christian Orthodox Psychology, or Spiritual-Philosophical psychology, which is developing vigorously now, continuing the tradition that existed in Russia in pre-Soviet period. These scientists we shall call here "Slavophiles" and assign them to a new group.

Thus, three groups of scientists result from our analysis:

- “Activity theory” (AT),
- "Westerners",
- "Slavophiles ".

Representatives of these groups are easy to identify on the basis of reference lists in their papers.

Let us consider the interests, ideals and constrains with respect to the integration with the mainstream, specific for the groups, which we denoted in Russian professional community.

3. What are the attitudes to the integration specific for different groups of Russian psychologists?

"Westerners", those who focus on Western theories. This group accounted for the bulk of the avalanche increment of psychological community in the 90's., due to massive emissions of translated foreign books on
psychological education market, the latter growing rapidly at that time. Globalist tendencies are naturally inherent here. But the growth of counter globalist tendencies in modern Russia to certain extent results from the disappointment of many of these people which befell them when they tried to enter the mainstream. Their research is of no interest there, their papers are not published in the international journals. This is not surprising, since a substantial part of this group of scientists studied foreign theories by translations and retellings, they do not read contemporary Western journals and therefore cannot meet the requirements of the discourse. However, there are many examples of successful integration of "Westerners" to international science, especially of those from leading universities, and as for the evaluation of the quality of work of a scientist, in respect to "Westerners", publications in international journals seem an appropriate criteria.

The other part of the professional community, which we have designated here as "Slavophiles" is rapidly growing since the beginning of the XXI c. Christian Orthodox, Spiritual or Philosophical psychology, develops the traditions, rooted in the pre-Soviet period of Russian psychology. This is an entirely authentic trend, closely related to Russian culture, focused in practices on a vast Russian market, based on Russian authors and appealing to the Russian mentality. Representatives of this group show no globalist tendencies, counter globalist tendencies are strong.

Publications in foreign journals, of course, are no adequate indicator of the quality of work of these scientists, and the necessity of a "breakthrough" into the mainstream for them is far from obvious. At the same time, in the long term it seems quite possible. It is well known that representatives of Russian Spiritual and Philosophical thought, who had been expelled from Russia in 1922 (N.A. Berdjaev, M.I. Vladislavlev, etc.), have had a significant influence on the development of international science, in particular, on the development of existentialism.

Successors the AT trend. What determines the globalist and counter globalist tendencies in this group of scientists? Let us consider their reasons "for" integration.

First of all, it is this trend that meets the expectations of foreign colleagues. It is recognized that for western colleagues Russian psychology is, above all, represented by the works of classics of the Soviet period: "... the representation of Russian / Soviet psychology in the West. ... can be assessed as the idea that Russian psychology is the works of such luminaries as Vygotsky and Luria " [7, p. 79]. And it is to this trend that there remains a steady and even growing interest in the international science. The analysis of literature indicates that as time passes, the interest in international psychology to Vygotsky's work is only growing, as reflected in the growth of index of citations of his work. According to this indicator in recent years Vygotsky moved ahead of many classics of foreign psychology [7], [11]. The interest in classics of Soviet psychology can promote an interest in the work of successors.

Thus, first, foreign colleagues are willing to hear scientists working in the AT trend. Second – the latter have something to say. These Russian psychologists have every reason to be involved in the dialogue with the West.

Behind the Iron Curtain psychological science was lively developing and many talented scientists contributed to it. The ideas of L.S. Vygotsky and I.P. Pavlov inspired new theoretical reasoning and empirical research alongside with ideas still unknown to the international community. Classical theories of Soviet psychology, known in the West, first of all the theory of L.S. Vygotsky, were developing on the native soil, and this development was different than in the West.

In addition to the development of the theories well-known to foreign colleagues there are other theories, which remain obscure for the West. First of all, I would name here B.G. Ananiev theory [12], [13], [14]. B.G. Ananiev’s theory remains obscure for the foreign scientific community. His name is not mentioned in modern foreign encyclopedias or journals. Few of his works that were translated into foreign languages, were not duly understood and appreciated by the psychologists’ community because of the specific notional and conceptual structure used by B.G. Ananiev. The conceptual structure of the theory, the issues discussed, do not directly correlate with the categorical structure of the modern international psychology, hence, this theory cannot be understood by Western scientists without special efforts. At the same time, B.G. Ananiev’s methodology and
theory seem to be fruitful within the intensively developing areas of the world’s psychological science provided
the categorical system he used would be adequately explicated [15], [16]. Among such areas of research and
topical issues may be named personality impact on psycho physiological functions, life-span human development
and age dynamics of psycho physiological functions in maturity.

Thus, the AT trend seems to be a welcomed contribution to the mainstream.

Would this integration be useful for Russian science?

I dare say that AT approach can keep on developing only if it is integrated into the mainstream. There is no
future for the development of the AT but in the bosom of international science. I believe Russian psychology is
now lacking every type of resources and lacking social demand to provide for isolated development of the AT
trend in Russia. Perhaps we are the last generation that has been taught to understand those texts, who masters
that language, that conceptual apparatus. After us the layer thins rapidly. Are there many among Russian
psychologists wishing to study AT approach today? I do not believe that best students queue to study AT even in
the prime universities which have preserved the teaching staff mastering the theory and methodology of the AT
approach. This trend was in demand in another country, with a different culture and a different mentality, in
different universities. If we do not ensure integration of the AT developments into the mainstream, the concepts
that have not yet been integrated are likely to share the fate of artifacts of a dead civilization. I believe that the
integration it is a matter of professional viability for scientists developing AT approach, and their duty to their
teachers.

However, it would not be true to say that in the AT group of scholars integration tendencies are domineering.

The point is that the integration strategy for the AT group encounters maximum constraints and tactical
difficulties. The language problem, the problem of translation, here turns up as a problem of hermeneutics,
bringing forth a necessity to relate the conceptual system of Soviet psychology, conceptual system so complex
and sophisticated, to the conceptual system of the mainstream. Consider for example the difficulties in translation
of a key scientific term of AT - "subj'ekt." Translation of this word as «subject» (unfortunately, it happens often)
immediately renders a text meaningless because of the mismatch of semantic fields, because of the difference of
the meaning attributed to the term in the texts of Russian scholars and meaning of the word “subject” in English
texts. Sub'ekt means somebody who’s activity is generated by his own needs, who is choosing and pursuing his
own aims, serving his own purposes: a self-determined and self-actualizing agent. And in English “subject”
means the opposite – it is something or somebody who is put under some pressure, exposed to some action,
subjected to some impact… This difficulty of translation of the notion of “Sub'ekt” into English could probably
account for the fact that AT approach caused more interest in Germany and in Scandinavia than in the English
speaking countries. A special hermeneutics is needed for the integration of AT texts into the mainstream.

So, the tactics of the movement towards integration for AT trend deserves a separate discussion, but the
necessity of the strategy for promoting integration seems obvious.

4. Conclusion
Thus, the answer to the question of the "optimum integration", the optimal combination of national specific and global traits in Russian psychology, cannot be universal and overall, and it cannot be formal. In search of "the optimum integration" it is necessary to take into account theoretical and methodological orientations of the scientists, as their motives and constrains with respect to the integration are substantially different. For those who cling to mainstream theories, the integration is a necessity and a true indicator of quality of work. For representatives of a new, rapidly developing authentic Russian trend of Orthodox Psychology the possibility and the necessity of a straightforward integration seem debatable at the moment. Particularly important and in the same time particularly difficult is promoting integration with the international mainstream for the successors of the Activity Theory. A special hermeneutics is needed to relate the conceptual system of Soviet psychology, so complex and sophisticated, to the conceptual system of the mainstream.

References: