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Psychology of Modernity as a Social Situation of Development: Challenges of Uncertainty, Complexity and Diversity

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Abstract

The following article is an introduction to the project “The Psychology of Modernity: Challenges of Uncertainty, Complexity, and Diversity”. The article discusses motives behind the creation of this project and the construct of «Psychology of modernity». There are different features of modernity described; a special focus is on the mechanisms of generating uncertainty in development of open structures. A hypothesis is formulated about the evolutionary meaning of art and religion in the invention of modernity. The article recognizes the role of historical-evolutionary methodology of interdisciplinary cognition as an integrative program of psychology, which allows the latter to enter into constructive dialogue with a broad range of sciences of nature, society and humanity.

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1. Introduction. Changing Change as a Discourse of Modernity

Here is a special edition of the journal “Psikhologicheskie Issledovaniya”, covering the first version of the project by different researchers, united into an intellectual network around the Department of Psychology of Personality at the Faculty of Psychology, Lomonosov Moscow State University. The name of the newborn project is “Psychology of Modernity: the Challenges of Uncertainty, Complexity and Diversity”. The project is an attempt to reflect on different changes happening in modern times. Rephrasing Koffka’s question: “Why do things look as they do?”[1], we ask: “Why does modernity look as it does?” Why do we see more and more often such qualities of modernity as polyphony, relativistic nature, acceleration of change, mobility, liquidity, diversity,

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complexity, heterogeneity, nonlinearity, multidimensionality and uncertainty, when describing modern times through the prism of different methodological optics? Without searching for answers to these questions in psychology, as well as in other sciences, we would live feeling no modernity beneath us and remaining “slaves of our own visual field”. All these questions did appear some time ago. Interest towards paradoxes of learning modernity has its own autobiographical history, which allows revealing motives of initiation into the current project.

Following the tradition of psychoanalysis let us search for some of these motives in our “professional childhood”. The first episode of professional childhood is an encounter with the discreet experimental work by J. Bruner and L. Postman “On the perception of Incongruity: A Paradigm” [2], done within the framework of “New Look”, an approach within psychology of cognition. This work deals with analyzing strategies of constructing percepts by humans facing incongruous situations. Analysis of the material of this study stimulated separation of the strategy of “ostrich” (perceptual defense) and perceptual vigilance (special increased sensitivity to oddities and change) when meeting incongruities of the visual world, as two different individual styles of perception; definition of the problem of steadiness of behavior in situations of uncertainty and formulation of the hypothesis about mindsets as mechanisms providing stability of behavior in the resilient world; and then to the definition of problem field of personality research as psychology of a changing personality in the changing world. It was then that there first appeared the association with Jules Verne’s motto “Mobilis in Mobile” engraved on the famous submarine “Nautilus” and following through all our works on non-classical cultural-historical psychology of human development. Today this motto has become one of the formulae of describing modernity [3].

The second episode is getting to know the study “Kakie Veroyatnosti Rabotaut v Psichologii” (What Kind of Probabilities Work in Psychology”), written by two authors, one of them was I.I. Gurevich, a famous specialist in quantum physics, and the other was I.M. Feigenberg, a follower of the creator of physiology of activity N.A. Bernstein, who developed the concept of probabilistic forecasting in the behavior of purposeful living systems. [4]. I.Gurevich and I. Feigenberg tried to justify the hypothesis that in psychology, as well as in non-classical physics, there is a working concept of “probability amplitude”. Thus they questioned the idea of using the discrete mathematical apparatus that had proved its worth in investigating the world of classical Newtonian physics, in quantum mechanics and psychology. These authors also drew attention to the necessity of accessing Niels Bohr’s complementarity principle and Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle for psychologists [5], [6], [7].

The third episode. In the 1970s a book by D. Bohm called “The Special Theory of Relativity” was published [8]. In his book devoted to the origins of relativistic outlook D. Bohm, speaking about Albert Einstein’s early years, viewed through the optics of J. Piaget’s approach, generated the following image: A. Einstein’s thinking lingered to enter Isaac Newton’s world of classical physics and, largely thanks to it, happened to be open to relativistic perception of the world. This situation described by D. Bohm prominently demonstrates how important it is to see reality through different optics and break through the barriers of traditional thinking in the process of cognizing the rapidly changing world.

All the three above-mentioned episodes aroused interest in the search for a methodology of cognizing complexity, in mind games focused on reflection of the world’s multidimensionality in different systems of coordinates. It is the transdisciplinary methodology that engrains the culture of mythopoetic thinking as “thinking in complexity”[9], moving through paradoxes in the form of seemingly simple questions in the style of the above question by Kurt Koffka: “Why do things look as they do?” Further we turn to the analysis of modernity through the prism of different optics, leading to “mental restructuring” (K. Duncker) of problem cognitive situations in the sciences of the current century.

And preceding this analysis with references this time to the present moment rather than the distant past let us first define the sense-making motive, leading to the creation of the ambitious project “Psychology of Modernity: the Challenges of Uncertainty, Complexity and Diversity”, as a motive for expanding the cognitive field of

psychological science, and second, let us emphasize the signature style of conveying the meanings and ideas of this project.

The purpose of the project now being offered to the attention of methodologists, psychologists as well as researchers, working on the borderlines of different sciences, is to develop a transdisciplinary program for researching cognition of the psychology of modernity, which like Ariadne's thread allows us to assemble the sciences of human development in nature and in society into one body, and thus, make a step along the path of transforming psychology into "not only actual, but also effectual science" [10]. In other words, the purpose of the program being launched is to propose a methodological framework for investigating transformation of people's mental world images in the conditions of "changing change", increased uncertainty, complexity and diversity, and how people react to these manifestations of modernity: from adaptation to complexity to archaic practices of simplification and isolation; from adaptation to the environment to adaptation of the environment [11].

And now let us speak about the style of narrative. Considering that modernity itself is presented in the project as a fruit of the social contract, a specially invented reality, the style of narrative in it is close to that of mythopoetic thinking, i.e. dialogical thinking, bringing rather meanings than senses to a conversation partner.

2. From polyphony of modernity to polyphony of life forms

Recently methodologists, philosophers, psychologists, sociologists and historians have joined an unannounced contest of reflections on modernity, and within this contest there are all kinds of projects and research programs being developed. It has become traditional to cite the works by I. Prigogine "Order out of Chaos: Man's new dialogue with nature" [12], "The Philosophy of Instability" [13], "The End of Certainty" [14], "Is Future Given?" [15], R. Harre's "The Rules of Disorder" [16], Z. Bauman's "Liquid Modernity" [17], A. Giddens's "Runaway World: How Globalization is Reshaping Our Lives" [18], and "The Consequences of Modernity" [19], U. Beck's "Risk Society, Towards a New Modernity" [20]. Recently this list was updated with the books by E. Morin "Method. The Nature of Nature" [21], and "Uncertainty as a Challenge. Media. Anthropology. Aesthetics" [22], by N. Taleb "Antifragile: Things that Gain from Disorder" [23] and "The Black Swan: The Impact of the Highly Improbable" [24]. Along with these trends we should also mention a surge of interest in such trends, epistemological turns, synergic and network revolutions of cognition of the looking-glass world as evolutionary epistemology, social epistemology, historical epistemology, cultural history epistemology, non-classical epistemology, post-nonclassical cultural analytical methodology of cognition, post-structural analysis of cognition of closed and opened systems, modern cultural anthropology, ethnomethodology and the methodology of interdisciplinarity [25], A. Megill, [26], Pruzhinin, [27], Prokhorova[28].

Among all these movements within the cognition of modernity, which have their projections to the methodology of concrete disciplines, we would like to draw attention to a discreet article by J. F. Lyotard "Note on the Meaning of 'Post'" [29], published in a special issue of the magazine "Innostrannaya Literatura", called "After Time: French Philosophers of Postmodernism". In this article J. Lyotard performs a special psychoanalytic deconstruction of discourse concerning modernity. He specifies a wide range of particular features of modernity, demonstrating all the ambiguousness of this concept.

Firstly, in the process of describing modernity there appears a risk of spreading the so-called linear chronology, when every new intellectual, cultural or technocratic movement is attributed with the term "Post-". It results in the inevitable zeroing of previous thinking practices and traditions. J. Lyotard shows that it is not an overcoming of the past, expressed in a break with tradition, that causes the washout, but it's mostly evolutionary snobbery and oblivion according to the psychoanalytic mechanisms of suppression and repression. It results in intellectual equilibristics with various "-isms": transavantgardism, neo-expressionism, and postmodernism.

Secondly, J. Lyotard warns against the game with the prefix "post-", connecting different postmodern projects with ideas of technical progress as social projects of liberating the humanity. He writes: "...obscure as it is the question about the reasons behind this complexification process is of great importance for me. We could say there exists a sort of destiny, or involuntary destination toward a condition that is increasingly complex. The

needs for security, identity and happiness springing from our immediate condition as living beings, as social beings, now seem irrelevant next to this type of compulsion to complexify, mediatize, quantify, synthesize and modify the size of each and every object. We are like Gullivers in a world of technoscience: sometimes too big, sometimes too small, but never the right size. From this perspective, today's insistence on simplicity generally seems like a pledge to barbarism.

On this same point, the following issue also has to be elaborated. Humanity is divided into two parts. One faces the challenge of complexity, the other that ancient and terrible challenge of its own survival. This is perhaps the most important aspect of the failure of the modern project — a project that, need I remind you, once applied in principle to the whole of humanity" [29].

J. F. Lyotard shows that the discourse of modernity itself is a conventional project. As a project, modernity has its own coordinate axes, such as complexity/simplicity, diversity/uniformity and uncertainty/determinacy. Similar ideas about modernity as a special project in the context of sociology and political science/politology are expressed by Antony Giddens [19].

Exploring the discourse of modernity and analyzing the value basis of various dimensions of modernity, psychologists and an assembly of representatives of different disciplines dealing with development of man, nature and society, are tempted freely or forcibly to violate Kozma Prutkov's rule: "Nobody can hold the limitless" and, once more in the history of human cognition, to go behind the looking-glass and initiate constructing the "theory of everything" [6], to dovetail Pavlov's dog with Schrödinger's cat [30], homozygous and heterozygous civilizations. The reason for such temptations of our mind, its eagerness to break through any limits, including the limits of reason, which are historically set by every époque, is inherent to the nature of modernity itself, to its permanent immensity. It is necessary to realize that there is always "the past" and "the future" packed into the perception of modernity in the dimension of "the present", that "space and time" are united in chronotopos, statics and dynamics, stability and variability, order and chaos [13], culture and explosion, rise and decline of civilizations, civilization and barbarism [31].

As a rule, the picture of modernity happens to be traumatized by history, by the historical past of humanity, by Auschwitz and Gulag, [32], by future shock and also by painful experience of it even before the advent of the époque of singularity. Reflection on the complexity of modernity makes us acknowledge that it is not only the cascading change of pace of technical progress. It is something more: changing change itself.

In order to understand dynamics of the liquidity and stability of modernity it is tempting to recognize the evolutionary sense of the role which art and religion play in the historical-evolutionary process of development of humanity: art functions through mastering and expanding the limits of modernity, performed by humanity, and religion, encapsulating chaos into "closed structures", as a special, time-tested cultural practice of psychotherapy of uncertainty, the axiological sealing of invariant models of the world, the spiritual production of ethical standards and traditions which act as stabilizers of social behavior of humans in different cultures. In this regard, highly heuristic is Lotman's idea that self-development of culture is performed through various mechanisms of producing uncertainty (2010). Thus it's no coincidence that the image of modernity, its fundamental understatement is uttered, tamed and invented with the help of myths, metaphors, such paradoxical creations as poetical vignettes by D. Kharms, impossible worlds by M. Escher, surrealist paintings by S. Dali, graphic art and painting by M. Chagall, philosophical poetics by J. Brodsky. Modernity is constantly being populated by various phantoms, resembling "visitors" from Solaris by S. Lem, who was much ahead of his time with his concept of virtual reality.

All these works, seen as opened structures, can be characterized according to the qualification of art appreciation /art perception by U. Eco [33]: "A work of art, therefore, is a cornpiece and closed form in its uniqueness as a balanced organic whole, while at the same time constituting an open product on account of its susceptibility to countless different interpretations which do not impinge on its unadulterable specificity. Hence, every reception of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself" (p. 4). We note that modernity is more felt, interpreted and explained,

rather than perceived. Thus, comprehension of it requires hermeneutic methods of investigation in the style of “interpreting modernity”. The prototype of this style of intellectual comprehension of modernity is Freud’s classic work “The Interpretation of Dreams”.

Investigation of the multidimensional nature of modernity usually doesn’t correspond to the Procrustean bed of the ideal of rationality. By following this ideal during perception and analysis of modernity a contemporary rarely finds himself in tune with the times. Personal and cognitive dissonance, which appears in the process of investigating modernity implies that, despite all his attempts to master modernity, a contemporary inevitably fails to catch up with the escaping day. “Syndrome of a contemporary”, one of incongruity with the times, with non-linearity and immensity of the present, causes effects equal to the fear of “the non-linear future” in their impact on a human and humanity. Among such effects we name, first of all, a classical phenomenon of stress – general adaptation syndrome, introduced to the everyday language as well as to the academic discourse by Canadian psychophysiological H. Selye, and, secondly, neurosis, described in K. Horney’s classical work “The Neurotic Personality of our Time” [34].

The effects of modernity which allow coping with the challenges of complexity, uncertainty and diversity also include, in my mind, such exaptational forms of life as risorial and carnivalesque actions, “game for the sake of the game, “risk for the sake of risk”. All these forms of life of a subject and a socium in the context of modernity undergo inversion, like in E. Rubin’s famous bifurcating images: what was a ground in the historical evolutionary process becomes a figure; what was a figure becomes a ground. Thus, exaptational processes, which were considered by A. Severtzov and N. Vavilov to be important in the evolution of different systems, gain the dominating position in the process of competition between stability and variability. In the field of liquid modernity the processes of adaptation, survival, achieving homeostasis lose their supremacy. For example, risk as a form of life, which was a black swan earlier in the historical evolutionary process, becomes a global and universal characteristic of forms of life in modernity, and becomes a usual practice for certain organizations [19], [35].

In the discourse of modernity there is also Lyotard’s hypothesis worthy of special notice that in response to increased uncertainty, complexity and diversity the humanity becomes differentiated into those who are ready to perceive complex things, and those who tend to simplify reality [29]. Civilization then can be regarded as mastering the complexity and uncertainty of modernity, and archaics as a tendency of social systems to adapt, to balance and to escape uncertainty, seeking life in a more primitive world.

Thus, axiological apperception of the axes of modernity allows relating what at first sight defies any interrelationship: abstract methodological schemes of cognition of complexity, uncertainty, diversity and adaptation and exaptation of different species in the historical evolutionary process; to see individual exaptation at a cost of development of variety within a species; to regard progress and regress as evolution and involution of variety of systems; to provide rationalization for inevitability of trends to the integration of cultural anthropology and neuroscience; to unveil a relationship between the phenomenology of multifaceted self-definition and polyphony of mind, on the one hand, and such emerging approaches of 21st century psychology as psychology of uncertainty, psychology of complexity and psychology of diversity, on the other.

Following this logic and based on the optics of the historical-evolutionary approach to development of human and society in biogenesis, anthropogenesis, ethnogenesis, sociogenesis and personogenesis, we emphasize once again that we begin to investigate the similarity of such dissimilar phenomena as polymorphism in genetics, polyethnicity and multiculturalism in anthropology and sociology, polyphony of mind and pluralism of identities in liberal arts and in psychology.

In our analysis we build bridges between methodology and practice, between humanities and natural sciences, expanding fields of cognition for psychology and allied sciences. Due to this optics of modernity there are new directions of transdisciplinary research emerging, connecting simplicity with primitivisation, barbarianism, archaics, fanaticism and totalitarian mind; elimination of diversity with xenophobia and ethnophobia, fear of uncertainty with an escape from freedom, self-alienation [36], authoritarian personality [37], [38], support of

variety with tolerance, complexity with pluralism of intellect, lateral thinking as an efficient way of solving nonstandard problems, with explosion of talent and creativity (E. de Bono [39], R. Sternberg[40]), uncertainty with exaptation and inelasticity, passing the limits of homeostasis, mutual aid and cooperation as factors of evolution and social progress.

There are certain techniques developed in order to operationalize different practices and research procedures for diagnosing uncertainty and complexity of modernity in psychological science such as diagnostics of tolerance/intolerance for uncertainty, diagnostics of cognitive complexity [41], psychosemantics of multidimensional mind.

Along with the classical works by D. Kahneman and A. Tversky such studies have caused the psychology of modernity to branch out in several special directions: psychology of uncertainty [42] (J. Feigenberg [7], a person in uncertainty, psychology of social instability, personology of inadaptive behavior, psychology of self-organization of psychological systems, psychology of complexity [43], psychology of informational socialization, etc.

Sometimes old things happen to be new again. If at the turn of the 20th century an outstanding feeling of modernity, its liquidity manifested itself in the concepts of “stream of consciousness” and “varieties of religious experience” by W. James, at the turn of the 21st century similar feeling leads to the emergence of such approach in psychology as “psychology of flow”.

Analyzing the above “syndrome of a contemporary” and various forms of life, acting as answers to the challenges of modernity, it is important to see the axiological bases of different dimensions and understand the above approaches in psychology as different “joint lines of evolution” in the course of development of psychology and allied sciences.

Rephrasing Koffka’s question once again, we ask: “Why is modernity invented as it is?” How is modernity experienced? Using which forms of life – social actions, communicative actions, personal actions – are the social worlds and life-worlds constructed? All of these questions are related to the horizons of cognition of modernity, and it would be insolent to think that the answers have already been found. When someone deals with the challenge of uncertainty, complexity and variety, he should try avoiding solutions that oversimplify modernity by extracting such cultural tools of cognition as the uncertainty principle and complementarity principle from the mental vocabulary of history.

Way back in 1967 V. A. Lefebvre made an insightful warning about the risks of manipulating complexity, uncertainty and variety through using thinking techniques. He wrote: “The triumph of the cybernetic approach has not only meant the appearance of new and efficient means for the analysis of complex systems, but also brought about a cataclysmic reduction of the ontological field within which scientific analysis takes place” [44].

And further V.A. Lefebvre notes that: “It seems to us that the key methodological issue for the study of complex objects is elaboration of models of the reality, models in which mental and material phenomena may be structurally connected. Depending on how this issue is resolved, we would either consider systems endowed with intellect to be part and parcel of physical systems or, conversely, we would be satisfied with two parallel lines of study and formulate our failure in a way similar to Bohr’s principle of complementarity [5].

We hope that the project “Psychology of Modernity: the Challenges of Uncertainty, Complexity and Diversity” will consider these warnings by V.A. Lefebvre and avoid building fictitious bridges on top of the gaps. O. Mandelstam once noted that literary schools develop through new tastes rather than new ideas. It is due to new views and tastes that hitherto unknown names emerge in science. And just in the same way as sociologists, ethnographers, anthropologists and linguists owing largely to L.S. Vygotsky’s cultural-historical school have embraced the cultural dimension of psychology, so will one day, maybe, new names of those mastering cognition of the complexity of modernity, including those mentioned in this article enter it thanks to the project “Psychology of Modernity: the Challenges of Uncertainty, Complexity and Diversity”.

Besides that, everything hitherto disconnected will begin connecting into a common intellectual network. Things that seemed to be an unpardonable sin for a researcher to do will become a norm of intellectual labor.

Thus, when previously an accusation of eclecticism was tantamount to a reproach or even a rebuke, today it has a chance of achieving the status of a methodological style, positively approved by the intellectual community under the name of “constructive eclecticism”. Such things as “professional dilettanteism”, genres of non-fiction journalism, “unlimited journalism” in the style of, for example, “optimistic studies” by I. Mechnikov., “life of animals” by A. Brehm (“Brehm’s Life of Animals”), “inevitability of the strange world” by D. Danin (“There’s no escaping the strange world”). Such daring popular journals as “Kot Shredingera” (“Schrödinger’s Cat”), which appeared in 2014, with its column “Diktatura budushego” // “Dictate of the Future”, accustoming our mind to the commonness of change, will be in high demand again. [30]. “Constructive eclecticism” and “professional dilettanteism” will become thinking techniques of transdisciplinarity.

Metaphor of science developing not only “into the bush”, but also “growing a trunk” helps to realize a rapid hybridization of different lines of thought: non-classical physics by Nils Bohr with the physiology of activity by Nikolai Bernstein; historians’ evidential paradigm with recognition of underlying motives of personality through Freudian slips; cultural historical psychology with cognitive neuroscience [46].

All these prognoses are related to the beginning of the project “Psychology of Modernity”, including the articles, assembled in the current issue of the journal “Psikhologicheskies Issledovaniya”, which allow integrating into the common problem field such lines of research appearing before our eyes as psychology of uncertainty, psychology of complexity and psychology of variety. We would like to believe that this issue becomes a first step on the way to the implementation of the project “Psychology of Modernity: the Challenges of Uncertainty, Complexity, and Diversity”.

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