

# Chapter 3

## The Structure and Dynamics of Age



### Outline of Chapter 3: The Structure and Dynamics of Age

In this short chapter, Vygotsky explains the relationship between the lines of development and the neoformation in general terms (i.e., in terms that should apply in each of the subsequent chapters). The chapter, as the title indicates, falls into two parts. In the first part, Vygotsky argues that new structures (neoformations) are both the culmination and the continuation of functional lines of development. In the second part, Vygotsky shows that the social situation of development is dynamic, because a home is not a house, but rather a small community surrounding the child that can and does change as the child changes.

- I. **New structures are both the culmination and the continuation of functional lines of development.** In the first part of this chapter, Vygotsky explains the emergence of the neoformation by introducing the lines of development (peripheral and central). Vygotsky begins by reminding us of the relationship between parts and wholes in structural psychology: it is the whole which determines the value of the part rather than vice versa, and consequently, the whole process cannot be understood as a simple sum of the independent partial processes but must instead be taken as a structural whole made up of interdependent processes. We remember that in Lecture 5 of *Foundations of Pedology* (see *Pedological Works, Volume 1*), the relationship between psychological functions at the outset of development was theorized as a system of dominants (Ukhtomsky). For example, in infancy, the dominant function is affective perception, and other functions, for example, memory and thinking, are still dominated by that function, that is, memory and thinking are linked to affective perception and not to each other, and they tend to operate in a manner that is affectively tinged and perception-dependent as a result. This principle now applies to the lines of development of the functions as well: each part of the process of development

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depends on its relation to the developing neoformation. Some central lines of development are directly involved with that neoformation. So for example the line of development of affect and perception in infancy that runs through receptive interest, shared activity, and active imitation is directly involved with the emergence of the central neoformation. Other, peripheral, lines of development are not directly involved with bringing this neoformation about. For example, the line of development of memorizing is not directly involved in the formation of the central neoformation. This neoformation is a generalized form of intersubjectivity that Vygotsky calls a “Grandwe,” perhaps because it is a “we” that is related to “you and me” in more or less the same way that a grandparent is related to a parent and also because it is a kind of proto-“we.” (Vygotsky was probably influenced by Goethe’s work on the “Ur-phenomenon” in plants.)

- II. **The social situation of development is dynamic, because a home is not a house.** In the second part of this chapter, Vygotsky explains the lines of development in turn by referring to the source of development: the environment. Here he must introduce a third key component: the social situation of development, which explains what Seth Chaiklin (2003, p. 51) calls the “objective” zone of proximal development.

Vygotsky begins by defining the social situation of development as the unique relationship that the child has to the environment (physical and then social) at a particular age. So for example at birth the relation is one of physiological separation from the mother, but it is also one of biological dependency. During infancy, it is still one of biological dependency, but it is now one of social contact. Vygotsky reminds us that this social situation of development is the ultimate source of all development: like that of all human beings, the child’s consciousness is determined by its social existence rather than the other way around. It follows, therefore, that neoformations, which are structures of consciousness, emerge from the social situation of development at the end of an age period rather than at the beginning.

However, it does not follow that the flow of developmental change is entirely one-way; the child is an actor, and not simply an inert object that is acted on by the environment. Vygotsky says that the child who has changed the very structure of his personality now has a very different relationship to the other personalities in the environment. It is not simply that the child perceives the world differently, the child learns to act in the world and on the world in different ways too. This in turn means that the social situation of development which brought about the neoformation now disappears. For example, the newborn infant who relied on pure instinct to feed and then learned to interact with a mother in order to satisfy its needs finds that instinctive life is all but useless in the learned habits of the feeding routine. Similarly, the infant who relies on wordless social contact to satisfy needs and then learns speech finds that wordless social contact does not actually convey specific needs beyond those that can be shared by affective perception. This destruction and restructuration of the social situation of development constitutes the content of the crisis. Therefore, it is not preventable. But can the destruction be predicted and can parents and

teachers intervene in a timely way to help in the process of restructuring? That possibility provides the content of Chap. 4.

### Chapter 3: The Structure and Dynamics of Age

The task of the present chapter consists in establishing the most general propositions characterizing the inner structure of the process of development, which we will call **the structure of age in each specific epoch of childhood**.

The most general proposition, which we must point out at the very beginning, is that the process of development in each age epoch, regardless of the complexity of its organization and its make-up, in all the multi-form constituents of the processes that make it up which are revealed with the aid of analysis, presents an altogether unified whole, has a certain strictly regular structure, and that the laws of the whole structure, or the structural laws of the age, determine the structure and the course of each separate process of development that forms a part of the whole. Such structures, known as holistic formations, do not sum up the individual parts, representing, as it were, their aggregate; instead, it is they which determine both the fate and the significance of each of the constituent parts.

Ages represent just such holistic and dynamic formations, the structure which defines the role and weight of each partial line of development. At each given age epoch, development is not accomplished in such a way that individual aspects or parts of the personality of the child's personality are changed with the result that a restructuring of the personality as a whole takes place. In development, there exists precisely the opposite relationship, which can be presented thus: the personality of the child changes as a whole in its inner structure, and the laws of change of this whole determine the movement of each of its parts.

As a consequence of this, at each given age step we always come upon a central neoformation, which appears to lead throughout the entire developmental process as a whole and which characterizes the reconstruction of the whole personality on a new basis. Around this basic, or central, neoformation of the given age are located and grouped together all the other partial neoformations, along with all the other processes of development linked to neoformations of previous and of subsequent ages. The processes of development which are more or less directly linked to this basic neoformation we shall call the central line of development of a given age, and all other partial processes of change taking place at the given age will be called peripheral lines of development. It stands to reason that those processes which are central lines of development during one age will become peripheral lines of development during the following, and conversely—peripheral lines of development in one age will come to the first plane and become central lines of development in another age, as there are changes in their significance and in their relative weight in the total structure of development, and as there are changes in their relation to the central neoformation. So, in the transition from one stage to another, the

reconstruction of the whole structure of the age is accomplished. Every age has its own specific structure, unique and proper to it alone.

Let us explain with examples what we have stated. If we focus on the consciousness of the child, understood as his “relation to his environment” (Marx), and we take consciousness generated by the physical and social changes of the individual, for the integral expression of the highest and most substantial features of the structure of the personality, we see that in the transition from one age to another what grows and develops is not only the separate, partial aspects of consciousness, not only its separate functions or ways of activity, but in the first place what changes is the general structure of consciousness which is characterized in each age first and foremost by a system of relations and dependencies that exist between the separate aspects, the separate types of its activity.<sup>1</sup>

It is quite clear that in the transition from one age to another, alongside the overall restructuring of the system of consciousness, the central lines of development change place. So, for example, the development of speech in early childhood in the period of its emergence is so closely and immediately linked to the central neoformation of this age when the social and objective consciousness of a child first emerges in its most tentative outlines that it is impossible that speech development should not be attributed centrality among the lines of development of this age. But at school age the continuation of speech development has a completely different relation to the central neoformation of the age and, consequently, should be considered as one of the peripheral lines of development. In the same way, in the age of infancy, when the form of speech babble occurs, these processes are linked to the central neoformation of the period of infancy in such a way that it should also be considered one of the peripheral lines of development.

We see, in this way, that one and the same process of speech development may act as a peripheral line in the age of infancy, becoming a central line of development in early childhood and once again turning into a peripheral line in the subsequent age. It is quite natural and clear that in direct and immediate dependence on this, the course of speech development, regarded as such, will in itself proceed in completely different ways in each of these three ages.

But the interchange of central and peripheral lines of development in the transition from age to age directly leads us to the second issue of the present paragraphs—the question of the **dynamics** of the emergence of neoformations. We once again, as with the question of the structure of ages, must restrict ourselves to only the most general explanation of this concept, leaving the concrete exposition of the dynamics

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<sup>1</sup>Vygotsky (1997) sees consciousness as not merely an external relation with the environment but also a system of internal functions (which are of course linked to the environment). So for example in the infant, attention, perception, and (short term) memory form a definite psychological system, and because this psychological system defines the child’s relationship to the environment we may define it as consciousness (2019). For Vygotsky, a central neoformation defines a form of mental life specific to a particular age, and in the infant this form of mental life (the “proto-we” of the child’s relationship with the mother) is not yet dependent on speech.

of the age changes to one side as a problem for subsequent chapters reviewing separate ages.

The problem of the dynamics of the age follows immediately on from the problem of the structure of each age. As we have seen, the structure of the age is not a static, unchanging, immobile picture. In each age, there is a transition from a preexisting structure to a new structure. The new structure is composed and emerges in the course of development of the age. The relationship between the whole and the parts, so essential to the concept of structure, is a dynamic relationship that determines change and development as a whole, as well as that of each part. By the dynamics of development, therefore, it should be understood the totality of all the laws that determine the appearance of transitions, changes, and the interconnections of structural neoformations at any given age.

The most basic and essential moment in the general definition of the dynamics of an age is a dynamic understanding of the relations between the personality of the child and the social situation surrounding the child at each given stage of the age. One of the greatest obstacles to theoretical and practical study in pedology as a science consists in the heretofore faulty solution of the problem of the environment and its role in the dynamics of the age. The fault lies in an understanding of the role of the environment in the development of the child in which the environment is considered as something which is external to the child, as the setting of development, a set of conditions that are objective and indifferent to the existence of the child, affecting him by their very existence. One cannot transfer to pedology, to the study of child development, the understanding of the environment which has developed in biology in relation to the evolution of animal species. It should be recognized that at the beginning of each given age period there exists a completely original, exclusive, unique, and unrepeatable relationship between the child and the environment specific to that age alone, which we will call the social situation of development of a given age. The social situation of development of a given age is the starting point for all of the dynamic changes occurring in development during a given period. It determines wholly and entirely the forms and the path by following which the child acquires newer and newer properties of his personality, drawing them from the environment as the main source of his own development, the path by which the social becomes the individual. In this way, the first question which we must address in studying the dynamics of any age consists of clarifying the social situation of development.

The given social situation of development, specific to each age, defines in a strictly regular manner the whole **form of the life of the child**, or his **social being**. From this arises the second question, with which we are confronted in the study of the dynamics of any age—that is, the question of the origins, or the genesis, of the central neoformations of the given age. Having ascertained the social situation of development that has developed at the beginning of this age and is determined by the relationship between the child and the environment, we must then elucidate how **the life of the child in this social situation makes necessary the emergence and development of neoformations** that are appropriate to this age. These neoformations, characterized primarily by the restructuring of the **conscious** personality of

the child, do not constitute the prerequisite but the result or the product of age development. **Change in the consciousness of the child arises on the basis of a definite form of his social life, specific to a given age.** That is why the maturation of a neoformation is never at the beginning but always at the end of a given age.

But once there arise neoformations in the conscious personality of the child, this brings about a change in that same personality. This cannot help having the most substantial consequences for the course of subsequent development. If the previous task in the study of the dynamics of the age lay in the task of defining the way that the child's social being moved the new structure of his consciousness forward, now the following task arises: defining the path of the opposite movement from a change in the structure of the consciousness of the child to a restructuring of his being. For the child who has changed the structure of his personality is another child, a social being which cannot help but differ, in its most essential form, from the being of a child of an earlier age.

In this way, the subsequent question before which we shall stand in the study of the dynamics of age consists in the question of the consequences which follow from the fact of the emergence of neoformations of the age. Through concrete analysis of this question, we may come to see that these consequences are so varied and so immense that they cover the entire life of the child as a whole. The new structure of consciousness acquired at a given age inevitably represents a new character of perceiving external reality and of activity in it, as well as a new character of perceiving the inner life of the child himself and the inner activity of his psychological functions.

But to say this means at the same time to say something else that brings us directly to the final moment that characterizes the dynamics of age. We see that as a result of age-related development there emerge at the end of a given age neoformations that lead to the restructuring of the whole structure of consciousness in the child and which in this way change his whole system of relations to external reality and to the self and which in this way change the whole system of relating external reality to the self. The child at the end of the age becomes a being of completely different substance than the one that he was at the beginning of the age. But this means that the social situation of development that has developed in its most basic components at the beginning of this age must also change. For the social situation of development means nothing less than the system of relations between the child of a given age and the environment. So, if a child has been changed in some radical way, this relationship must inevitably be restructured. The former situation of development breaks up to the extent of the course of development of the child and so in proportion to the progress of his development, the main features of a new situation of development, which must constitute the starting moment for the new age, are made up. Research shows that such a restructuring of the social situation of development makes up the important content of the critical ages.

In this way, we come to the elucidation of the basic law of ages, according to which the very forces which move the development of the child at a given age lead inevitably to the rejection and destruction of the foundation of this development during this age, and with an inner necessity determine the annihilation of the social

situation of development, the end of an epoch of development and a transition to the subsequent, or higher, age stage.

Such, in very general terms, is the schema of the dynamic development of age.

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