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Is Psychology in the Position to Contribute to Shape “Healthy and Joyful Imaginaries”?

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Abstract

This article is a comment on Maria Lapoujade paper “Life Imaginaries in Gaseous Societies.” Maria Lapoujade argues that due to the increase of pace of human, social life since modernity humanity finds itself in a deeply morally degraded and culturally diseased state. Thus, Lapoujade calls for efforts which need to be undertaken from all possible areas—the humanities, arts, sciences, religions, education, and politics—to the healing of the diseased aspects of contemporary humanity, efforts, aimed at curing our species from overall blind irrational cruelty by promoting positive, joyful “imaginaries.” Viewing psychological science as a powerful creator of “imaginaries,” I address the point whether psychology can and should contribute to that endeavor.

Keywords Acceleration of the pace of human history · Contemporary social life · Virtualization · Globalization · Multicultural world · Anthropological problem in psychology · “Imaginaries”

Introduction

One can hardly underestimate the role of psychological science in creation of the “imaginaries,” which determine life of human society, since the very moment when psychology established itself as an academic discipline. Suffice it to recall the impact of Freud’s classical psychoanalysis and the concepts of neo-Freudians and humanistic psychologists on the culture of the twentieth century. In fact, all of these theoretical models, from Freud’s Id-Ego-Superego,

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to Maslow's ladder of human needs, are nothing but "imaginaries" created to make people start running, like the carrot that Maria Lapoujade is referring to.¹ These models cannot be considered a science: they are not based on facts and cannot be refuted by facts, neither by observations, nor by experiments.

Moscovici classical book (Moscovici 1961) presents a beautiful assessment of how those penetrate social consciousness, and their impact on society, culture, and civilization is patent in the history of the twentieth century.

Should and can our science, the mighty dream creator, now respond to the call of Maria Lapoujade to promote "positive imaginaries" as a cure for the civilization, diseased with the pace of changes? Do we know what imaginaries deserve to be considered positive?

The Pace of Life and Changes

Maria Lapoujade points at the beginning of the twentieth century, seeking to determine the moment when the pace of human life changed dramatically. I believe we have to consider an earlier point also.

Acceleration of the historical process in the first half of the nineteenth century reached a level when the speed of radical changes in culture became commensurate with the change of generations, which resulted in the conflict of generations, well reflected in literature of the nineteenth century. Children did not want to follow the example of their parents anymore, since the experience of parents in their new world was already inapplicable. For the first time in history culture, the way society lives appeared as something subject to change, temporary, and conditional. The individual found himself in a certain kind of conscious *relation* to the society.

It seems no coincidence that psychology established oneself as an academic discipline soon after, which was premised by the appearance of a new type of relationship between the individual and the society. The problem off Nature and Nurture arose, and of how natural (universal) and social (culturally conditioned) coexist in human nature. However, before the First World War, the notion was still dominant that *socium*, culture, is something, though historically changing, but certainly more stable than the individual psyche. Durkheim argued that the society, the culture, is the salvatory of the system of cognitive frames, which assimilated by a human turns his volatile mental impressions and experiences into a sustainable human cognition. Justifying that human cognition is grounded on the social life, Durkheim wrote that the basis of all human cognitive categories is a social practice common for all members of the community. If in the same period of history people would not have cognate concepts of time, space, number, etc., any cooperation between individuals would become impossible, and consequently, impossible would become any social life. If someone violates the common norms of cognition, society ceases to regard him as a normal human being and treats him as a pathological one.

At the edge of the twentieth century, the problem of cultural differences, of meeting with an alien cultural reality, still seemed relevant only to exotic countries and peoples, distant from Western civilization. The First World War knocked down the European world. The social upheavals and antagonistic contradictions that swept the world opened up a new dimension in

¹ "With a real carrot, we can make a donkey move forward. It suffices to make a man imagine one for him to start running" (Lapoujade 2018, p. 9).

the relationship between the individual and society. The change of biological generations no longer could keep up with radical changes in culture. For the first time in history, humans faced the challenge of a situation where social representations of good and evil, of justice and injustice, the general rules of behavior were radically changing on the run.

For the first time in the history of psychological science, the new vision of the relationship between the *socium* and the individual arose, counterposing a relatively stable individual to a changing world. The problem of Nature and Nurture has taken on a new posing. The importance of these issues in public life was so great that exploring the contradictory relations between individual and society became the “nerve” of psychology of the twentieth century, both for theoretical schools and for practical psychology (Mironenko 2005, 2015).

Psychological theories of the twentieth century focused on the analysis of human existence in the changing world. However, they still grounded on the belief that in the changing world a person remains the same, remains himself. The twenty-first century ushered in problems of the loss of the individual's socio-cultural identity, loss of his own social self.

What Is Happening Now?

We can still hear that we live in the time of changes. However, it seems that the word “change” no longer reflects the essence of what is happening. “Change” implies a transition from one relatively stable state to another. Meanwhile, the world of contemporary humans is increasingly becoming a continuous stream of changes, the existence of humans has acquired a completely new character, which cannot but lead to changing of the human himself.

In the globalizing world, human existence no longer occurs in the context and framework of a particular culture—at the intersection of cultural contexts, in a multidimensional and multipolar cultural space, the personality is stratified and multiplied—and the answers to questions: What do I believe in? What norms do I follow? Who am I?—need to be made continuously and a new.

The virtualization of society, which was barely dawning in the last decades of the twentieth century, now has become the obvious reality. A radical transformation of human existence came along with the penetration of digital technologies into all spheres of social life. In the net communication occurs not between real people, with their real statuses in the common shared reality, but between the imagined nominal personalities. Human consciousness as traditionally grounding on the unity of social, commonly shared reality comes into question.

Human consciousness has traditionally been viewed by psychologists as a phenomenon emerging from a shared, collective activity, in the process of which each of the participants contributed, fulfilling his specific task, and by joint efforts a result was achieved that served to satisfy the participants' real needs. In the conscious shared and joint activity, human language is rooted, ensuring the unity of the real world and the worldviews of the communicators, the unity of social and individual representations.

Virtualization has engendered the feeling of losing the reality of life, reflection of which was the movie “Matrix” and the like, which followed it. In the sixth century BC, Heraclitus wrote: “The waking have one common world, but the sleeping turn aside each into a world of his own.” It is no longer obvious for contemporary humans that we all awake, live, feel, and act in the same common world. Mediated by virtual reality, in the absence of an obvious reliance on the objective reality of the shared life in the common real world, interaction between people does not provide the experience of mutual *understanding* in the process of

communication, does not provide the experience of the *personality* contact with the partner in communication, and—as a consequence—experiencing the reality of one's own personality.

The boundaries of the personality in the virtual world are blurred, and the structure loses its certainty and tends to a kind of “flickering of the form,” which generates a painful complex of personality and communication problems for a contemporary human, focused on the issue of self-consciousness of the individual who has lost the opportunity to answer the question “Who am I?” through simple and direct observation of one's own kind.²

In the discussions of sociologists, the modern society is represented as an “open, nonlinear and continuously moving” system (Adkins and Lury, 2009, p. 16); where social processes are highly unpredictable and mobile (Castro and Lafuente 2007). In these conditions, the question that classic sociological theories sought to answer—“How is society organized?”—can no longer be put forward, since its formulation presupposes an axiomatic idea that a certain *society* as a stable system of social relations, interactions, and structures exists. Thus, it is no longer a question of finding the stable characteristics of the “social” but rather being attentive to the uncertainty which undermines the usual modes of thinking regarding “society.”

It is a new and challenging world we are living in now. It cannot be assessed and comprehended by notions and schemes of the previous periods. This newness can be frightening and repulsive, clashing with our ideas about the proper and the good. But is there a reason for the apocalyptic pictures that Lapoujade draws in her paper? Is contemporary time so scary and was there a less cruel time in history? The epidemics of the plague, the horrors of the Inquisition, torture, and public executions—was it really better? The fights of gladiators in the Roman Coliseum—better, more fun than contemporary mass culture? What kind of reality does Charles de Coster, Dickens, and Dostoevsky depict in their novels? Things which seem terrible to our contemporary, for his ancestors just a few generations ago were normal and ordinary. Considering the historical process, facts, rather than tendentious interpretations,³ we have every reason to conclude that there takes place a moral progress of mankind, and not its degradation. If you do not hear laughter, do not see smiles, just go out of your house more often.

Psychology Facing the Globalizing World

Radical changes in human existence of the last two decades remain underestimated in psychological discourse, though the radical change of the very subject of social and human science is largely discussed by sociologists. The fact that in psychology such ideas are hardly conceived may be the result of psychology's still being mainly oriented to comprehend the “perpetual nature” of the human. Meanwhile, time has come to realize that it is no longer a question of finding the stable characteristics of the “human” but rather being attentive to the uncertainty which undermines the usual modes of thinking regarding “human.” As repeatedly has been noted in the literature (Castro and Lafuente 2007; Marsella 2012; Moghaddam 1987; Rose 2008), the twentieth century mainstream psychology developed based on assessments of

² “Since he comes into the world neither with a looking glass in his hand, nor as a Fichtean philosopher, to whom ‘I am I’ is sufficient, man first sees and recognizes himself in other men. Peter only establishes his own identity as a man by first comparing himself with Paul as being of like kind. And thereby Paul, just as he stands in his Pauline personality, becomes to Peter the type of the genus *homo*.” (Marx, Capital, Volume I, Chapter One (1867)

³ Some authors glorify Athens BC as the ideal of democratic freedom, losing sight of the fact that this society was slave-owning.

personality of a human belonging to contemporary Western culture and practices of culturing traits, sought after in Western culture. These psychological characteristics acquired the status of universality in mainstream psychology, as exemplified by the concept of so-called “universal human values.” Due to the stereotype of taking a western citizen for a human in general, mainstream psychology is dominated by an implicit tendency to blurring boundaries between human culture and human nature and perceiving both as basically static (Mironenko and Sorokin 2015).

A shift is needed from fixation on static concepts and implicit theories of immutable human nature to the idea of human as an infinitely changing creature. Because culture is, first of all, the ability to change, the speed and extent of changes being unique for humans among other animals.

Psychological science throughout its history has addressed the problem of the individual—a socialized individual, who because of his involvement in culture already “...has no “nature”—no simple or homogeneous being. He is a strange mixture of being and nonbeing. His place is between these two opposite poles. (https://archive.org/stream/ErnstCassirerAnEssayOnMan/Ernst+Cassirer+-+An+essay+on+man_djvu.txt). Is it time to understand that the social nature of man over the past decades has undergone same radical changes as the society in which humans exist.

The Anthropological Problem in Contemporary Psychology

Psychological theories of the twentieth century focused on the analysis of human existence (“*étant*”) in the world, to the analysis of human attributes. The question of the human essence (“*être*”) was not put up there, within the framework of the relatively isolated development of schools that was implicitly supposed to be clear in each discourse.

The current integration of international global psychological science highlights the fact that the “*être*” which schools were analyzing is not necessarily the same for different theoretical approaches. The main question that psychology has to answer today is what is this “*être*”? What is human? The anthropological problem becomes the main problem of the present stage of the development of psychology.

The question is not really new; Socrates has asked: “Who am I?” a long time ago.

“Know thyself” was inscribed in the forecourt of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi. All the philosophical and religious systems offer their answers, but now this question has no longer an abstract philosophical meaning, but is vitally important for humanity. It is in the air of the contemporary world.

Either explicitly or not, psychological theories built on a certain philosophical conception, a certain theoretical model of a human, confirm or refute some ideas on the essence of human nature and meaning of human life. The ongoing integration of psychological knowledge reveals that the theoretical models implicitly embedded in the theories of different schools vary significantly.

This raises the question: how do these theoretical models relate? Do they complement each other, or, perhaps, mutually exclude? Without addressing this issue, dialog of theories in the network of global science is impossible. On this evidence, the potential for the ambiguity and variability of the resulting prognoses, the *dialectical* nature of the proposed theoretical models, is of particular importance. Here, Russian psychology, which remains insufficiently integrated into the international science, can be in the position to contribute.

To comprehend the approach to the problem of the essence of the human personality, which underlies Russian psychological theories, the dialectics of two philosophical traditions, whose influence on the development of Russian psychology, should be considered (Petrovsky and Yaroshevsky 1996).

At the origins of the first of these is Nikolai Chernyshevsky, the second was originated by Vladimir Soloviev. They laid down in Russia the traditions of posing the problem of personality in psychology, basing on opposing ways of understanding its nature.

Chernyshevsky's anthropological principle can be traced from Sechenov to Pavlov and Ukhomsky and then to Marxist Soviet psychology with its Activity Theory approach, oriented to natural sciences. The theological principle by Solovyov shows in the apology of the "new religious consciousness" in the writings of Berdyaev, Frank, and others—in the course of the religious and philosophical trend, which seemed disappeared forever in Russia after 1922 (Mironenko 2015), and remarkably revived in the post-Soviet period.

It is important that the development of psychological science in Russia from the very beginning took place in a situation of acute polemics and a constant dialog between these two trends, the natural-scientific and the spiritual-philosophical. This initially gave a dialectical character to the posing of the problem of personality in Russian psychology. This constantly, implicitly, if not explicitly present counterpoint prevented one-sided, "flattened" and simplified interpretations, served to retain the tension of the overarching goal of monistic materialistic explanation of the phenomena of the spiritual life of the individual in the development of natural scientific Soviet psychology. Thanks to this, the rapid revival of the Orthodox spiritual and philosophical psychology in post-Soviet Russia became possible, after seventy years of declared atheism and materialism.

Perhaps, the theoretical model of human being, implicitly laid down in the foundation of the Russian psychological tradition, is hardly not the only one in academic psychology, which fits the idea of freedom of man from the dictatorship of the laws of nature, so much is discussed by philosophers, from Plato to Cassirer (Mironenko and Sorokin 2015).

In the era of globalization, the formation of a global science inevitably takes place, which presupposes both general renovation of the domain of psychology, new objects of research, as well as changes of the subject of research activity—the International Scientific Community. The formation of global psychological science determines not only processes of integration, but also processes of differentiation in science, so that theoretical models of human nature that have been firmly rooted in the mainstream in the second half of the twentieth century are now being called in question as well as methodological foundations of these theories.

Conclusion

New global psychology is formed as a multipolar network, including very different centers; it appears not as a new theoretical flow, but rather as a bifurcation reaction, as a divergent development of new and reinterpreted old psychological theories in an attempt to comprehend the new empirical realities generated by the era of globalization. It seems that global science can be defined as a new stage in the development of psychological science, generated by the new reality of the world, for the description of which the old theories are no longer suitable (Zhuravlev et al. 2018). The discourse of global psychology is aimed at the formation of a discipline that can adequately respond to the challenges of the time, reflects the psyche of

contemporary human being, living in the global world where intensive interaction of cultures takes place.

Can and should contemporary psychology respond to Lapoujade's call for the creation of positive imaginaries? I.e., imaginaries "ideologically" approved, "correct," fitting to someone's opinion? Who can be the judge in the world of multiple cultures, ideals and ideologies? Which theoretical approach has the *right* scale to measure what is "positive," when the scales are different?

It seems that here we are faced with one of the perennial problems in the development of our science: the split of practical and scientific psychology. Practical psychology is based on the use of imaginaries, specially designed. It continuously creates and elaborates all new carrots,⁴ forcing people to run after them. As for the scientific psychology, the psychology which tries to be a science at least—I believe that science should avoid value judgments. This is like Thinking–Feeling dichotomy by Carl Jung: conceptual understanding versus appreciation in the sense of acceptance or rejection. These contradict and hinder each other. The integration of the practical and scientific part of psychology should be dialectical, not removing contradictive points, but each trend trying to address one another's questions, thus developing on the basis of mutual contradictions. And I believe this is not new in the development of our science. Contradictions exist and they should be preserved as a basis for the development of the two. Practical psychology is serving the needs, the *interests* of the reality of human life. Science should stick to its own rules; its *ideals* of rational conceptual cognition, which are not realistic, can never be fully realized, but still should be the guiding star for scientific research (Mironenko 2016). You cannot serve the Lord and mammon. An allegation is dangerous. A good example is the attempt to apply in practice directly the cultural historical theory which led to the bloody collapse of the Soviet practical psychology in the 1930s (Mironenko 2013).

It is highly unlikely that scientific psychology can ever offer a complete and definitive answer to the question of what is good and how to achieve it. This is not a problem to be addressed by a science, let us leave it for religion. Scientific psychology has no recipes for happiness and success. But in a world where such receipts are persistently offered and imposed by the media, the receipts which are deceptively simple, and often very dangerous, scientific psychology can be very useful. I agree with Maria Lapoujade that contemporary mass media is full of harmful "imaginaries." But to my mind, the harm is not that those are gloomy and frightening, but that those are inane, introducing in people's minds gullibility and irrationalism. In my opinion, the "healing" mission of our science today is not to create some kind of "positive" simulacra in the mass consciousness, but to destroy the scientific claims of simulacra, which modern mass culture willingly gives a scientific appearance. I believe what is very dangerous is a specific phenomenon in modern culture, that has been actively developing since the last decades of the twentieth century, which can be called pop-psychology, which uses the pirated brand of science. Unlike traditional popular science, which expounded the achievements of science in a language understandable to the broad public, pop-psychology, in a pseudoscientific language, presents unreliable fantasies and speculations, successfully selling the self-help books of happiness and success, abundant in bookstores and in the Internet, following which deprives people of common sense and the ability to build constructive social relations.

⁴ "With a real carrot, we can make a donkey move forward. It suffices to make a man imagine one for him to start running" (Lapoujade 2018, p. 9).

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