



The Relation Between Environment and Psychological Development: Unpacking Vygotsky's Influential Concept of *Perezhivanie*

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Received: 8 June 2022 / Revised: 28 August 2022 / Accepted: 24 September 2022
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Abstract

In recent decades, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (VST) has become particularly influential in the fields of education and educational psychology. *Perezhivanie* is an important concept in VST that stipulates a relative influence of environment on a person's psychological development depending on their age or stage of development. However, *perezhivanie* has been differentially interpreted and applied in previous literature to suit the purposes of domain-specific research. The lack of a comprehensive theoretical understanding of the concept can undermine research findings and their implications for educational practices. Drawing on a content analysis of Vygotsky's key texts on *perezhivanie*, this paper provides a much-needed theoretical discussion that unpacks comprehensively the theoretical content of *perezhivanie* and the methodological principles guiding its application. The findings revealed that conceptually, *perezhivanie* can be defined as: (a) a theoretical relation between an individual and their environment, (b) an abstract experience of or attitude towards a life situation and (c) a concrete lived experience of an event within that situation. Four major discernible components of an individual's *perezhivanie* include the environmental factor, personal characteristics mobilised, refraction prism and psychological influences. Five key methodological principles were conceived to assist the employment of *perezhivanie* in educational/psychological research: (1) utilising a *perezhivanie* as a unit of analysis, (2) analysing *perezhivanie* at different levels, (3) accounting for the perspective of the individual involved, (4) constructing the refraction prism and (5) determining the major personal characteristics mobilised in the *perezhivanie*. Implications for educational and research practices are then discussed.

Keywords Vygotsky · *Perezhivanie* · Environment · Cognition · Emotion · Sociocultural theory

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Introduction

At the social turn in education, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (VST) has become particularly influential. Lantolf et al. (2021) observe that since its introduction, "the amount of research that has been published within the SCT [Sociocultural Theory] framework has grown exponentially" (p. 327). Indeed, in recent years, the concept of *perezhivanie* has enjoyed "growing pervasiveness", emerging as a prominent theoretical lens in educational research (Cole & Gajdamschko, 2016, p. 271). *Perezhivanie* serves as a powerful theoretical lens to extrapolate the differential role of a person's environment in their psychological development (Veresov, 2020; Vygotsky, 1994). It has been utilised widely in previous educational and psychological studies to examine adult-children interaction in playworlds (Ferholt, 2009, 2015), parent-child interactions (Chen, 2015), adults' experience of caregiving (Brennan, 2014), emotional regulation (Fleer & Hammer, 2013), drama-based pedagogy (Davis, 2015), second language learning (Mok, 2013), reading development (Ng & Renshaw, 2019), writing development (Mochizuki, 2019), and teacher development (Dang, 2013; Feryok, 2020; Golombek, 2015).

Although it has gained increasing attention from researchers, knowledge of *perezhivanie* remains incomplete, fragmented and controversial. Smagorinsky (2011) claims that "*perezhivanie* thus far remains more a tantalising notion than a concept with clear meaning and import to those who hope to draw on it" (p. 339). Likewise, Fleer (2016) observes that previous research using *perezhivanie* has yet provided "a full picture of what this concept means for research" (p. 44). The lack of consistency in interpreting and using this concept by no means suggests a lesser extent to which it must be theoretically discussed and clarified. As Veresov (2020) maintains, "before developing or advancing the theoretical content we should first clarify and describe what is the original theoretical content of the concept we want to develop" (p. 62). As such, it is urgent and important to explore and refine our theoretical understanding of *perezhivanie* to further inform empirical research.

This paper aims to provide a systemic understanding of *perezhivanie* in terms of its theoretical content and methodological principles, which was accomplished by carrying out a content analysis of Vygotsky's key texts on *perezhivanie* (see also Michell, 2016; Veresov, 2016). As for its structure, the paper begins by providing a brief overview of the current research literature on *perezhivanie*. The methodological aspects of this research are then presented before the findings or themes generated as a result of our data analysis are elaborated. The fourth section provides a discussion on the value of *perezhivanie* and its implications for educational and research practices.

A Brief Overview of the Current Literature on Understanding *Perezhivanie*

In previous literature, *perezhivanie* (a Russian term) has been translated into English in different ways, for instance, "emotional experiences" (Fleer, 2016; Golombek, 2015; Vygotsky, 1994), "lived experiences" (Mochizuki, 2019; Mok, 2013), "lived-through experiences" (Ferholt, 2009), "lived-through emotional experiences" (Golombek & Doran, 2014) and so forth. There are two possible reasons for this. First, *perezhivanie* has no English equivalent. As Veresov (2017b) contends, "[t]he term *perezhivanie* is quite difficult to explain and almost impossible to translate" and "[t]here is no English equivalent for this term" (p. 47). It is important to note that

perezhivanie is a countable noun in Russian, with its plural form being *perezhivaniya*. In this article, *perezhivanie* will be used as is or interchangeably with “experience” and “lived experience”.

Different interpretations of the concept are another plausible factor underpinning its different labels. Two major debates revolving around *perezhivanie* can be briefly mentioned here. The first group of scholars question whether *perezhivanie* is mainly indicative of emotions and thus should be translated as emotional experiences (Antoniadou, 2011; Golombek & Doran, 2014; Ramos & Renshaw, 2017). However, this position has been refuted by other scholars who argue that cognition is an at least equally important component of a *perezhivanie* (Fleer, 2016; Veresov, 2016, 2020).

The second debate argues whether *perezhivanie* is about dramatic emotional events (Davis, 2015; Smagorinsky, 2011; Veresov, 2017a). Veresov (2017a) considers drama and *perezhivanie* as inherently interrelated phenomena and refers to the latter as “dramatic *perezhivanie*” (p. 47). Meanwhile, other scholars view experiences as having similar structures or characteristics; they mainly differ in terms of our perception of the meaning of the situation and the emotional intensity provoked. For example, Bakhurst (2019) argues the following:

In my view, experience* [*perezhivanie*] is just experience. We can drop the Asterix. All experience contains the dimensions illuminated in the discussion of experience* [*perezhivanie*], it’s just that the emotional, evaluative and agential dimensions of experience are often familiar, undramatic and unproblematic, and don’t pose questions for us that prompt reflection, or at least reflection that is enduring, agonizing and transformative. (p. 4)

To put it another way, the second debate deals with whether *perezhivanie* is a special case of experience. Generally, in previous literature, scholars who postulated *perezhivanie* as dramatic events often drew on Vygotsky’s (1971) thesis, *The Psychology of Art*, or applied the concept in drama-related research. The differential interpretations of *perezhivanie* stipulate the need for further theoretical examination of the concept in a more reliable and systematic manner.

As a pervasive yet unfinished concept of Vygotsky (Cole & Gajdamschko, 2016; Smagorinsky, 2011), previous scholars have relied on different approaches to substantiate and further theorise *perezhivanie*. While some scholars revisit Vygotsky’s key publications, for instance, *The Psychology of Arts* (Vygotsky, 1971) (e.g., González Rey, 2016b; Smagorinsky, 2011), others try to elucidate the concept by “clarifying the place and role of this concept within the cultural-historical theory and examining the connections of this concept with other concepts, principles, and laws of the theory” (Veresov, 2020, p. 46). More recently, there has been a call for utilising a systematic corpus-based methodology in interpreting Vygotsky’s texts to provide more accurate and representative interpretations of his theory (Cong-Lem, 2022; Van der Veer & Yasnitsky, 2011; Veresov, 2016). The current study adopts such an approach, which is elaborated on in the next methodological section.

Method

Approach and Materials

Since *perezhivanie* has been divergently interpreted and applied in domain-specific areas, trying to reach a joint understanding of the concept may not be possible or appropriate. Fleer (2016) contends that “*perezhivanie* in many aspects is represented as a splattering of

ideas that scholars have drawn upon in different ways to make sense of complex data, and this work collectively does not give a full picture of what this concept means for research” (p. 44). Therefore, it would be more fruitful to base our discussion of *perezhivanie* primarily on Vygotsky’s original texts (see also Veresov, 2016, 2020). Van der Veer and Yasnitsky (2011) contend that “[i]t is only on the basis of an accurate corpus of all of his publications that we can arrive at an adequate assessment and subsequent elaboration or criticism of Vygotsky’s work” (p. 475). Veresov (2019) reiterates this point, stating that, “dealing with Vygotsky’s legacy, especially with English translations, we should always undertake a sort of small textual investigation” (p. 63). Accordingly, in this study, we adopted a close analysis of Vygotsky’s key texts on *perezhivanie* to allow for a more accurate and representative view of Vygotsky on *perezhivanie* (see also Cong-Lem, 2022).

As informed by previous scholars (e.g., Fleer et al., 2017; González Rey, 2016b; Smagorinsky, 2011; Veresov, 2019, 2020), two major texts of Vygotsky on *perezhivanie* include (1) *The Problem of Environment* (Vygotsky, 1994) and (2) *The Crisis of Age Seven* (Vygotsky, 1998). Also, another version of Vygotsky’s (2019) *The Problem of Environment*, translated by David Kellogg and Nikolai Veresov (who is a Russian native speaker), was also taken into consideration in analysing and interpreting *perezhivanie*. These key texts were utilised as primary data for further content analysis.

Data Analysis

Content analysis approach (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) was utilised to analyse the data with the support of NVivo v1.6.2 (Mac version), which involves three major stages. First, the author read the texts for an overall impression and preliminarily coded relevant segments of information. Then, in the second stage, the texts were revisited back and forth to refine the initial nodes, which were then grouped into broader categories. Lastly, in the third stage, these categories were clustered into themes depending on their meaningful relationships. Also, two translation versions of *the Problem of Environment* (Vygotsky, 1994, 2019) are regularly cross-checked to detect possible semantic differences and to clarify when there was ambiguity in one version. These analytical processes, though presented linearly, were iterative and dynamic in practice.

Findings

Conceptualisation of *Perezhivanie*

What is *perezhivanie*? While Vygotsky referred to it in different ways, a careful analysis of his texts and instances where the concept was utilised indicates three discernible meanings of *perezhivanie*: (1) as a theoretical relation between an individual and their environment, (2) as a person’s attitude towards or an abstract/generalised experience of their holistic life situation and (3) as a concrete experience of a specific event within that social situation. In this paper, the term “situation” is used to suggest one’s life circumstance at a holistic overarching level, whereas the term “event” suggests an instance within that social situation. This conceptual difference between the two terms mainly aims to differentiate *perezhivanie* at two distinctive analytical levels and does not necessarily reflect the meanings of these words in everyday use.

As the Relation Between an Individual and Their Environment

First, *perezhivanie* was postulated by Vygotsky as the theoretical relation between an individual and their environment or, in Vygotsky's terms, "the internal relation of the child to the environment" (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 292). Vygotsky (1994) maintained that "it ought to be able to find *the relationship which exists between the child and its environment* [emphasis added], the child's *perezhivanie*" (p. 341). In another instance, Vygotsky (1998) asserted "[e]xperience [*perezhivanie*] must be understood as *the external relation of the child as a person to one factor or another of reality* [emphasis added]" (p. 294). This relation is not absolute but relative for two major reasons: (1) the environment where a person lives changes as they grow up and (2) they themselves also change in the process.

[T]he environment in the most direct sense of the word varies for each child according to age level ... Even when the environment remains little changed, the very fact that *the child is changing in the process of development* leads to the circumstance that the role and the significance of these environmental moments ... begin to have a different significance and play a different role. (Vygotsky, 2019, pp. 68–69, emphasis in original).

In understanding the impact of environmental factors on a person's development, it is important to determine this dynamic relationship because "if the relation is different the environment exerts its influence in different ways" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 346). Since this relation is relative and partially determined by the environment, it cannot be fully extrapolated without regard to the individual. Vygotsky (1994) maintained that "it is *not any of the factors in themselves (if taken without reference to the child)* [emphasis added] which determines how they will influence the future course of his development, but *the same factors refracted through the prism of the child's perezhivanie* [emphasis added]" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 340). Vygotsky postulated that the influence of a person's environment on their psychological development is refracted in their *perezhivanie* which functions as a psychological prism (re)adjusting the impact of the environment.

As an Individual's Attitude Toward or Abstract Experience of a Life Situation

Secondly, Vygotsky referred to *perezhivanie* as *a person's attitude towards their environment or a form of abstract/generalised experience of their holistic life situation* and contended that it is through exploring this abstract experience/*perezhivanie* that we can shed light on how an environment has a differential impact on individuals living in the same social situation. Vygotsky presented the case of three children who were abused by their alcoholic mother. Though living in the same situation, their course of mental development evolved in different trajectories:

One of them experienced it as an inexplicable, incomprehensible horror ... The second was experiencing it consciously, as a clash between his strong attachment, and his no less strong feeling of fear, hate and hostility. And the third child experienced it ... as a misfortune. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341)

Vygotsky continued to explain what he thought was the underlying cause for the different psychological outcomes of the children:

How can one explain why exactly the same environmental conditions exert three different types of influence on these three different children? It can be explained because *each of the children has a different attitude to the situation* [emphasis added]. Or, as we might put it, each of the children *experienced the situation* [emphasis added] in a different way. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341)

According to Vygotsky, the children embarked on different psychological trajectories as they had formed different *attitudes* towards the situation or *experienced the situation* differently. Again, the term “situation” here necessarily means the overarching social situation rather than any concrete experience of a specific event within it. What is important to point out is that the term “experience”, at this level, cannot be understood simply as or reduced to any concrete empirical experience. Rather, it is an abstract experience that has been generalised from more concrete experiences. For instance, according to Vygotsky’s explanation, the third child experienced this life situation as “misfortune”. Also, the term “attitude” per se refers to “[a] *relatively enduring* [emphasis added] organisation of beliefs, feelings and behavioural tendencies towards socially significant objects, groups, events or symbols” (Vaughan & Hogg, 2017, p. 154). Accordingly, a *perezhivanie* of a life situation indicates a relatively stable relationship between a person and their environment, which is normally established after a series of prior experiences (i.e., *perezhivaniya*).

As a Concrete Lived Experience of an Event

At the lowest analytical level, *perezhivanie* can be considered a person’s concrete experience of a specific event within their overarching social situation. Vygotsky (1994) postulated that “the essential factors which explain the influence of environment on the psychological development of children, and on the development of their conscious personalities, *are made up of their perezhivaniya* [emphasis added]” (p. 339). Each of these *perezhivaniya* is a *perezhivanie* that signifies an important developmental point in the course of the person’s mental development. Compared to a person’s attitude towards or their abstract experience of a life situation, an event-specific *perezhivanie* can be less stable: “different events also elicit different *perezhivaniya* in the child” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 343).

The three different conceptualisations of *perezhivanie* presented above are not meant to suggest different *perezhivaniya*; rather, they indicate how *perezhivanie* should be understood and analysed at different analytical levels (see the section “[Studying *Perezhivanie* at Different Analytical Levels](#)” below).

Theoretical Content of *Perezhivanie*

To provide a more refined understanding of *perezhivanie*, its theoretical content must be comprehensively unpacked. The analysis of Vygotsky’s texts revealed four discernible components of a *perezhivanie*: (1) the environmental factor, (2) personal characteristics, (3) refraction prism and (4) influence (see Fig. 1). The first two components can be considered the *source* or materials mobilised in a person’s *perezhivanie*, whereas the third one (i.e., the refraction prism) suggests its functioning mechanism. Lastly, the *influence* component deals with the consequences of a *perezhivanie* (i.e., how a person experiences an event).

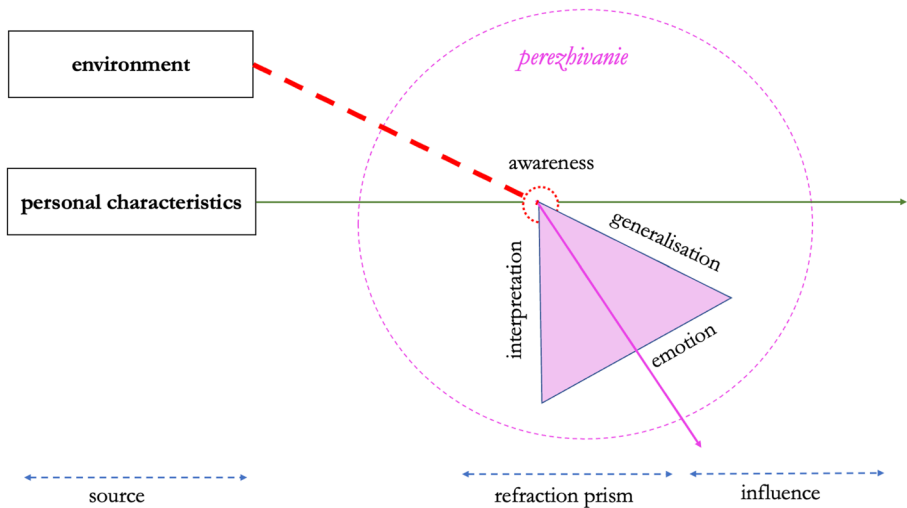


Fig. 1 Content and functioning of *perezhivanie*

Environmental and Personal Characteristics

Environmental and personal characteristics are the first two major components of a *perezhivanie* (see Fig. 1), and they exist in unity. As Vygotsky (1994) stipulated, “in a *perezhivanie* we are always dealing with an indivisible unity of *personal characteristics* and *situational characteristics* [emphasis added]” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342). What are then the roles of the environment and of the personal characteristics in a *perezhivanie*?

First, as Vygotsky theorised, a person’s environment plays a controlling/directing role in their development and also in their *perezhivanie*. Vygotsky (1994) contended that “environment, a situation which influences the child in one way or another[,] ... *directs his development* [emphasis added]” (p. 346). Focusing on a *perezhivanie*, Vygotsky maintained that “the forces of the environment acquire a *controlling significance* [emphasis added] because the child *experiences them* [emphasis added]” (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 294). Environment thus plays a pivotal role in directing and leading one’s psychological development although its impact is relative rather than absolute as discussed in the previous section.

The second component involves the person’s characteristics mobilised in that specific *perezhivanie*. Importantly, it is these characteristics that determine how the individual ultimately experiences the event. It is of particular importance to point out that only certain characteristics of the individual are selected to participate in their *perezhivanie*, which is partly contingent on the triggering event. Vygotsky (1994) underscored that a *perezhivanie* “does not just represent the aggregate of the child’s personal characteristics..., but different events also elicit different *perezhivaniija*” (p. 343). He further explained the following:

[D]o all of my own personal constitutional characteristic elements, of every type, participate fully and on an equal basis? Of course not. In one situation, some of my constitutional characteristics play a primary role, but in another, different ones may play this primary role which may not even appear at all in the first case. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342)

Accordingly, in examining a person's *perezhivanie*, we need to explore (1) which characteristics of the individual are mobilised in the *perezhivanie* and (2) which one(s) a dominant role. This functioning principle of *perezhivanie* can be summarised and termed as the “*selective mobilisation principle*”, which has implications for understanding human subjectivity. People with and without certain characteristics can experience the same event differently. Vygotsky (1994) reasoned as follows:

Imagine I possess certain constitutional characteristics – clearly, I will experience this situation in one way, and if I possess different characteristics, it is equally clear that I will experience it in quite a different way. This is why people's constitutional characteristics are taken into account when differentiating between those who are excitable, sociable, lively and active and others (p. 342).

In summary, this section has discussed two fundamental components of a *perezhivanie*—the environment and mobilised personal characteristics. While the former assumes the controlling role, the latter, selectively mobilised, determines the extent to which it impacts the person's mental development.

Refraction Prism

At the heart of a *perezhivanie* is its refraction prism or functioning mechanism, which ultimately determines the influence of the environment. Vygotsky maintained that in researching the impact of the environment, “[i]t ought to always be capable of finding *the particular prism* [emphasis added] through which the influence of the environment on the child is refracted” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). This *refraction prism* comprises both cognitive and emotional processes—“how the child becomes aware of, interprets [and] emotionally relates to a certain event” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). In other words, cognition and emotion are inherent elements of the prism. While they are to be discussed below as seemingly separate processes for analytical purposes, they should be understood as being mutually interactive and existing in unity from the VST perspective (Lantolf & Swain, 2019; Nguyen, 2018).

As for the cognitive aspect, Vygotsky emphasised the need to explore the degree to which a person understands and makes sense of the experienced event. He used different cognitive terms to indicate varying levels of understanding of the event possessed by the children in his clinical examples, including “becomes aware of”, “interprets” and “generalize” (Vygotsky, 1994, pp. 314–344). Accordingly, awareness, interpretation and generalisation are three key cognitive processes to be discussed in this section. They are not different processes but, in the context of this paper, are progressive levels of a person's true comprehension of an event. It should be noted that these terms may not differ in their everyday meanings.

First, awareness suggests the need for a person to be cognisant of an environmental event before they can be psychologically influenced by it (Vygotsky, 2019). Within the context of this paper, *interpretation* refers to how the individual makes sense of the current event, whereas *generalisation* indicates their capacity to understand the *true* meaning and significance of the event beyond the current event/experience. The subtle conceptual difference between *interpretation* and *generalisation* can be elucidated with Vygotsky's analysis of a clinical case where a mentally retarded child was frequently teased by his friends but did not develop more severe psychological consequences. The

explanation for this situation, as discussed by Vygotsky (1994), was not because the child failed to interpret his concrete experience but rather because he was unable to generalise from it:

This [i.e., a more severe mental consequence] does not happen because he does not fully comprehend the sense and meaning of what is happening to him....Why is this? *It is due to the fact that the child is not fully aware of his situation ... [and] neither is he able to generalize it* [emphasis added] and, as a result, never reached the stage which every normal child reaches, by developing a feeling of inferiority, a sense of humiliation and one of damaged self-esteem (p. 344).

He further added that “the child, himself, realizing that he was very doomed, talked about it ... and when he now is being teased he does not like it” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 344). It is due to the child’s lack of the generalising capacity that he did not develop “a feeling of inferiority, a sense of humiliation and one of damaged self-esteem” and was thus “spared and protected from situations which may cause extreme suffering for normal children” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 344).

This [mentally deformed] child is also being teased and humiliated and in fact he, too, has ended up in an extremely difficult position, but all this for him is like water off a duck’s back, *because he is not capable of generalizing what was happening to him* [emphasis added]. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 344)

In addition to the cognitive processes discussed above, Vygotsky acknowledged emotion as another constituting process of the refraction prism—“how a child ... emotionally relates to a certain event” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). As such, it is also important for scholars to consider and reveal the potential impact of emotions on a person’s cognition and thus, the extent to which they are impacted by the triggering event (see Cong-Lem, 2022 for a discussion of Vygotsky’s perspective on emotion and its relation to cognition).

Vygotsky’s emphasis on an individual’s cognitive capacities (e.g., generalisation) has been criticised as a form of intellectual reductionism by several scholars working in this line of research. For instance, Bozhovich (1968) argues the following:

If the concept of *perezhivanie* developed by him (Vygotsky) brought us closer to the interpretation of the real causes of child development, the subsequent search for the psychological basis of *perezhivanie* that concluded in the concept of generalisation, led us back to intellectualist positions. (as cited in González Rey, 2016a, p. 347)

While an evaluation of whether Vygotsky is an intellectualist is beyond the scope of this paper, it is important to point out that he does differentiate between two types of thinking (realistic/intellectual and pathological) where emotion plays a differential contributing role.

In realistic [normal] thinking, however, the emotional process plays a supporting and subordinate role rather than a leading role. In autistic [pathological] thinking, the emotional process takes the leading role. The intellectual process assumes the supporting role. (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 337)

Also, his analysis of the *perezhivaniya* of clinical cases is full of emotional terms (e.g., “horror”, “feeling of fear, hate and hostility”) (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). As such, it is also essential to consider the personal characteristics of the individual when analysing the role of emotion in their *perezhivanie*.

Influence: Emotional, Physiological and Psychological

The fourth component of *perezhivanie* is concerned with *how* the person experiences the event or the influence of the event. Vygotsky maintained that “[a] *perezhivanie* is always related to something which is found outside the person – and on the other hand, ... *how I, myself, am experiencing this* [emphasis added]” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342). In his texts, Vygotsky demonstrated the influence of a *perezhivanie* in terms of emotional, physiological and psychological effects.

First, emotion is inherently connected to our thinking (Vygotsky, 1987), and an emotional response is a natural part of an experience or *perezhivanie* as Vygotsky discussed “how the child experienced this particular event emotionally” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 343). Again, he used various emotional terms to describe the *perezhivaniya* of the three children in the example discussed above. For instance, the second child “was experiencing it consciously, as a clash between his strong attachment, and his no less *strong feeling of fear, hate and hostility* [emphasis added]” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). Indeed, *perezhivaniya* also result in the development of one’s emotional life, which in turn has an impact on one’s thinking and intellectual development (see also Cong-Lem, 2022):

In a school-age child, there is generalization of feelings, that is, *if this kind of situation had happened to him many times, an affective formation would have developed* [emphasis added], the character of which would relate to a single experience or *affect the way understanding relates to a single perception or recollection* [emphasis added]. (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 292)

In addition, *perezhivanie* has physiological consequences for the individual. This is also clearly illustrated with the first child, from the example above, who “reacts to the situation by developing a number of neurotic symptoms ... [and] attacks of terror, enuresis and ... a stammer” (p. 340). It should be noted that Vygotsky argued elsewhere in his works that physiological states are inherent consequences or companions of emotions but not emotions per se (Cong-Lem, 2022; Vygotsky, 1987).

The third type of influence, central to the discussion of *perezhivanie* in this paper, is related to one’s psychological development, examples of which can involve a new understanding, insight, attitude and personality. The mental development of the third child in Vygotsky’s example above illustrates this point:

This child had a limited mental ability but, at the same time, showed signs of some precocious maturity, seriousness and solicitude. He already understood the situation. He understood that their mother was ill and he pitied her. He could see that the younger children found themselves in danger when their mother was in one of her states of frenzy. And he had a special role. (Vygotsky, 1994, pp. 340–341)

The third child developed, conceivably after a series of *perezhivaniya*, new insights into the situation, of his family members and of his new “special role”. He thus became more mentally mature than other children of a similar age.

The different types of influence discussed above are inherently interrelated. For instance, emotional and psychological consequences are closely connected (Vygotsky, 1987). Also, as the person interprets and re-interprets their (prior) experience, consequences of a *perezhivanie* should be understood and analysed from a developmental perspective where internal emotional, psychological and physiological influences interplay on an ongoing basis.

Researching *Perezhivanie*

In addition to its theoretical value for studying the differential role of environment in psychological development, *perezhivanie* also has methodological implications for psychological research. This section delineates five key principles guiding an investigation into a person's *perezhivaniya*. These principles are conceived drawing on Vygotsky's theorisation of *perezhivanie* and how he analysed his clinical cases using the concept of *perezhivanie*.

Perezhivanie as a Unit of Analysis

The first principle postulates a *perezhivanie* as a unit of analysis. Vygotsky was critical of the analysis that dismantles a psychological process into elements: "in science the analysis into elements ought to be replaced by analysis which reduces a complex unity, a complex whole, to its units" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). Instead, he advocated for analysing a research phenomenon into units. There is a major difference between an element and a unit. The former has specific characteristics which may not reflect that of the whole phenomenon. It is just like hydrogen (H) and oxygen (O), which are elements of water although neither of them individually possesses the characteristics of water (Vygotsky, 1987).

On the contrary, a unit still retains the features of the original phenomenon. As Vygotsky explained, "these units represent such products of analysis which do not lose any of the properties which are characteristics of the whole, but which manage to retain, in the most elementary form, the properties inherent in the whole" (p. 342). As such, from the VST perspective, the result of a scientific analysis should be units rather than elements and "[o]ne example of such a unit is *perezhivanie*" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342). It is thus essential to treat and analyse *perezhivanie* as a unit of analysis in studying psychological development.

In previous literature, *perezhivanie* has also been discussed as a unit of consciousness (Michell, 2016; Veresov, 2017a). Veresov provided another translation of a section of text in *The Crisis of Age Seven* (Vygotsky, 1998):

But every *perezhivanie* is my *perezhivanie*. In modern theory, *perezhivanie* is introduced as a *unit* of consciousness, that is, a *unit* in which the basic properties of consciousness are given as such, while in attention and in thinking, the connection of consciousness is not given. Attention is not a *unit* of consciousness, but is an element of consciousness in which there is no series of other elements, while the unity of consciousness as such disappears, and *perezhivanie* is the *actual dynamic unit of consciousness*, that is, the consciousness consists of *perezhivanie*. (Vygotsky, 1984, as cited in Veresov, 2017a, p. 65, emphasis in original)

Here, it should be noted that, due to Vygotsky's premature death, both *perezhivanie* and consciousness are unfinished concepts and need further theorising. The concept of consciousness is differentially conceptualised in Vygotsky's theory, for example, as a reflex of reflexes and as a system of interrelated psychological functions (Zavershneva, 2014). Future research is warranted to explore how *perezhivanie* can be exploited as a unit of analysis or to examine the development of a person's consciousness under the influence of their social environment.

Studying *Perezhivanie* at Different Analytical Levels

The second principle stipulates the need to study *perezhivanie* developmentally and at different analytical levels. The general overarching goal of studying *perezhivanie* is to (re)construct the theoretical relation between an individual and their environment, which determines the influence of the environmental factors on a person's course of psychological development. Empirically, *perezhivanie* can be further analysed at the holistic situational and event-specific levels or macro- and micro-levels, respectively (Veresov, 2020). At the macro-situational level, researchers should explore the participant's general attitude towards the environmental factor(s). This attitude towards a life situation is relatively stable and is normally established after the individual has undergone a series of prior *perezhivaniya*. At the micro-level of the analysis, researchers should examine their concrete *perezhivaniya* of specific events within that social situation. By studying *perezhivaniya* at different analytical levels, we can (re)construct the relation between an individual and their environment, thereby explaining the developmental influence of the latter more effectively.

Accounting for Participants' Perspectives

The third principle in investigating *perezhivanie* stipulates the need to account for *perezhivanie* from the viewpoint of the individual involved. Vygotsky critiqued viewing environmental factors as existing outside the individual and having an objective influence on them.

One of the major impediments to the theoretical and practical study of child development is the incorrect solution of the problem of the environment and its role in the dynamics of age when the environment is considered as something outside with respect to the child, as a circumstance of development, as an aggregate of objective conditions existing without reference to the child and affecting him by the very fact of their existence. (Vygotsky, 1998, p. 198)

Accordingly, environmental factors should not be analysed as objective conditions separate from the individual's attitude towards them. The construction of *perezhivanie* and its psychological influence are largely determined by the characteristics of the individual mobilised in the situation.

That is why from the methodological point of view it seems convenient to carry out an analysis when we study the role the environment plays in the development of a child, *an analysis from the point of view of the child's perezhivaniya* [emphasis added] because, as I have already said, all the child's personal characteristics which took part in determining his attitudes to the given situation have been taken into account in his *perezhivanie*. (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342)

Accordingly, if researchers fail to account for the experience from the viewpoint of the participants, the analysis of *perezhivanie* is reduced to one side—the study of objective characteristics of the environment, which is inadequate and ineffective to account for the relative influence of one's environment on their development from Vygotsky's perspective.

Constructing the Refraction Prism

The fourth principle requires the revelation of the refraction prism of the individual's *perezhivanie*, which can be done by examining "how the child becomes aware of, interprets [and] emotionally relates to a certain event" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 341). Accordingly, it is important that researchers reveal how the participant becomes conscious of, interprets, and emotionally relates to an event. It is also of particular importance to reveal different levels of understanding or the degree of understanding (i.e., generalisation) of the situation, which determines the extent to which the person is influenced by the situation. A person's capacity to generalise new insights beyond the current situation and thus develop new mental qualities is particularly decisive in their psychological development. To clarify this point, let us imagine a situation where two teachers have similar communication issues with international students but experience them differently. One teacher experiences the situation with perplexity, whereas the other could develop the insight that the situation was caused by their lack of intercultural knowledge. The latter can thus be considered to have developed a generative understanding of the situation compared to the former. The dissimilar *perezhivaniya* can, in turn, underpin their different developmental trajectories in handling the tension.

Determining the Major Personal Characteristics Mobilised

The fifth principle deals with the question of whether we need to account for all personal characteristics in researching a *perezhivanie*. This, from Vygotsky's perspective, is a non-essential task. As discussed in the section "[Environmental and Personal Characteristics](#)", *perezhivanie* functions on a selective mobilisation basis where an individual's relevant characteristics are mobilised to contribute to their *perezhivanie*. The central task of researchers is thus to identify those characteristics that have been mobilised and are influential in establishing the relation between the individual and their environment. He explains the following:

It is not essential for us to know what the child's constitutional characteristics are like per se, but what is important for us to *find out is which of these constitutional characteristics have played a decisive role in determining the child's relationship to a given situation ... [or] those characteristics which played a role in determining the attitude to the given situation.* (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 342)

To illustrate, let us consider a situation where a male student is assigned two assignment tasks, resulting in two different *perezhivaniya*. He experiences one assignment positively, owing to his feeling of confidence in accomplishing it, whereas he has a negative attitude towards the second task primarily because he does not like the topic. In the former case, it is his self-efficacy (i.e., underpinned by his knowledge and experiences) that assumes a dominant role in determining his *perezhivanie*, whereas, in the latter, it is his interest (i.e., affective aspect). In understanding a person's *perezhivanie*, it is thus particularly important to determine the key personal characteristics that underpin it.

Discussion

Environment, *Perezhivaniya* and Psychological Development

Perezhivanie has implications for understanding the nature of the relationship between an individual's environment and their psychological development, which is an indirect relationship mediated by or refracted in the person's *perezhivanie*. In other words, a *perezhivanie* can be understood theoretically as a relation between an individual and their environment. It can be empirically investigated by examining the person's attitude towards the holistic social situation and their concrete *perezhivaniya* of specific events. The concept of *perezhivanie* postulates environment as a source of development and not as development per se (Veresov, 2017a). As Vygotsky stipulated, "environment should not be regarded as a condition of development which purely objectively determines the development ... by virtue of the fact that it contains certain qualities or features" (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 338). The role of environment in a person's psychological development cannot be fully extrapolated without accounting for their personal *perezhivaniya* in that social situation.

Drawing on the insights in this paper, some (mis)conceptions of *perezhivanie* should be clarified. The first deals with whether *perezhivanie* is simply a typical experience. *Perezhivanie* is not a new type of experience and, in this respect, Bakhurst (2019) was correct in arguing that empirically, any experience can potentially be a *perezhivanie*. As Vygotsky (1994) pointed out, a *perezhivanie* can arise "from any situation or from any aspect of ... [the] environment" (p. 339). However, when it comes to psychological research attempting to explain human psychological development, not all experiences are considered *perezhivaniya* in Vygotsky's sense and meaning. Theoretically, only experiences with a psychological influence on and implications for a person's trajectory of development should be considered true *perezhivaniya*. Vygotsky (1994) postulated that "the influence of environment on the psychological development ..., and on the development of their conscious personalities, are made up of their *perezhivaniya* [emphasis added]" (p. 339). From a pragmatic point of view, one may question the meaning and value of studying experiences that have virtually no influence on a person's development because, for instance, the individual is unaware of them. However, this distinction between a general experience and a *perezhivanie* (in its empirical meaning) should be understood in a relative sense. This is because whether an experience is worth investigating (i.e., being meaningful for explaining a person's course of development) also depends on the purpose and context of the research.

Second, other scholars have questioned whether *perezhivanie* can be understood as an interpretation. The insights from the section "[Theoretical Content of *Perezhivanie*](#)" should quickly dispel this notion. A *perezhivanie* or any lived experience is non-reducible to a person's cognitive interpretation of the meaning of the event. An experience always implicates other emotional and agential dimensions (Bakhurst, 2019) as well as the mutual interaction between emotion and cognition in their unity. This can be further clarified by revisiting the conceptual difference between sense and meaning from Vygotsky's perspective. He clarified that while "[s]ense is a dynamic, fluid, and complex formation which has several zones that vary in their stability", "[m]eaning is only one of these zones of the sense that the word acquires in the context of speech" (Vygotsky, 1987, p. 276). Accordingly, it is incorrect to conflate *perezhivanie* with a person's interpretation (i.e., meaning), which overlooks the individual's sense and emotions associated with that event.

At this stage, another important theoretical question of *perezhivanie* to discuss is the relationship among *perezhivaniya*. As *perezhivanie* is theorised as a concept within VST

(Veresov, 2020), we need to resort to VST as a whole to address this question. From the VST perspective, the relationships between *perezhivaniya* should be understood as relational and conditional. First, it is relational since the relation between an individual and their environment keeps changing as they grow and also because “different events also elicit different *perezhivaniya*” (Vygotsky, 1994, p. 343). Furthermore, psychological development occurs through “a series of *qualitative transformations* [emphasis added], each of which conditions the next stage and *is itself conditioned by the preceding one* [emphasis added]” (Vygotsky & Luria, 1994, p. 147). Likewise, in developmental terms, each *perezhivanie* in a series of *perezhivaniya* is necessarily pre-conditioned by the foregoing.

The discussion of the relationship among *perezhivaniya* further implies the potential of understanding the psychological dimensions that are not directly related to their current *perezhivanie*. For instance, let us imagine an individual has developed a new mental quality as a result of experiencing an environmental event. Then, this new quality has become one of the available constitutional characteristics of that person which can be readily mobilised in their subsequent *perezhivaniya*. As such, in any *perezhivanie*, the mobilised personal characteristics also suggest the psychological qualities developed in prior *perezhivaniya*. In other words, another theoretical value of studying a person’s *perezhivaniya* is that it allows for the exploration of those mental dimensions that could have been developed in other situations.

Educational Implications

The insights into Vygotsky’s concept of *perezhivanie* presented in this paper have important implications for educational practices. First, they stipulate the need to individualise pedagogical tasks to suit learners with different characteristics. A learning environment with certain favourable features is crucial yet insufficient to determine the learners’ development. In the same line, it would be naive to believe that a new teaching approach or a new technology can generate the same developmental impact on classroom learners. Personalising tasks can thus contribute to optimising learners’ experiences (*perezhivaniya*) and their psychological influences. For example, by allowing the learners to read stories or work on topics of their interests (e.g., Cong-Lem, 2018, 2020; Lee, 2007), educators can make the learning process more meaningful and effective for the students and their *perezhivaniya* of the lesson (i.e., the environmental force).

Second, *perezhivanie* implicates the role of emotions and thus motivation in the learning and development process. On the one hand, as discussed above, emotion is an inherent component of a person’s *perezhivanie* and is thus influential in determining the individual’s thinking and psychological experience of the event. Furthermore, since emotion and cognition are mutually interactive (Vygotsky, 1987), educators need to attend to both the intellectual and emotional needs of their learners. In his theorisation of *play*, Vygotsky was critical of the view that play only serves as a tool to promote children’s intellectual development:

[I]t seems to me that to refuse to approach the problem of play from the standpoint of fulfilment of the child’s needs, his incentives to act, and his affective aspirations [emphasis added] would result in a terrible intellectualization of play. (Vygotsky, 1967/2016, p. 6)

Next, knowledge of *perezhivanie* further informs how educators should support academically failing students by examining both environmental and personal factors as potential causes and determining the major personal characteristics involved in the situation. Also, teachers should consider the fact that learners with and without certain characteristics can experience the same pedagogical event differently (Vygotsky, 1994). For instance, a student with adequate digital skills may experience a new web-based learning approach more favourably than one who lacks such skills. In this case, if the digital skills are determined to be the key characteristics underpinning the experience of the underperforming students, an intervention can be carried out to address the issue and thereby enhance their *perezhivanie* and learning achievement.

Utilising *Perezhivanie* in Research

The methodological principles delineated in this paper should be adhered to in utilising the concept of *perezhivanie* for educational/psychological research. For instance, the second principle stipulates the need to study *perezhivaniya* at different analytical levels. In previous studies on (preservice) teachers' professional learning, for example, the investigation of *perezhivaniya* seems to have been mostly limited to exploring the participants' interpretations of and emotions associated with the event (Ng, 2021; Yang & Markauskaite, 2021). Other aspects of *perezhivaniya*, including (re)constructing the developmental relation between the participants and their environment and determining those personal characteristics mobilised in their *perezhivaniya* (i.e., the fifth principle), tend to be overlooked.

In explaining psychological development, while the term "refraction" is useful to illustrate the functioning mechanism of *perezhivanie*, it would be simplistic and inadequate to account for psychological development merely as whether an environmental factor is refracted in a person's consciousness. As discussed in the section "[Refraction Prism](#)", Vygotsky's emphasis was on the *degree of understanding* or *generalisation* of the meaning or significance of the existing situation, which is decisive in determining the psychological influence of an environmental event, as opposed to whether the individual can interpret it or whether it is refracted.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to the current literature with a systematic and comprehensive theoretical discussion of *perezhivanie*, a prominent concept in Vygotsky's cultural-historical theory. A close content analysis of Vygotsky's texts (Vygotsky, 1994, 1998, 2019) was performed to allow for more generative and representative insights into the concept. The paper helps inform scholars of the theoretical values of *perezhivanie* and important methodological principles that assist researchers in utilising the concept to study the differential role of environment, individual differences and/or human subjectivity.

Since *perezhivanie* is an unfinished concept of Vygotsky's, there are still other questions that have not been addressed in this paper. For instance, two further questions that contemporary scholars should consider are as follows: What is the role of interpretation in studying *perezhivaniya*? What are epistemological and methodological consequences entailed? Further theoretical discussions and empirical research in particular are needed for validating and extending the use of this important concept in educational practices.

Funding Open Access funding enabled and organized by CAUL and its Member Institutions. This work was supported by the Australian Government Research Training Program (RTP) Scholarship and Monash International Tuition Scholarships (MITSS).

Data Availability I do not analyse or generate any datasets, because this work proceeds within a theoretical approach.

Declarations

Research Involving Human Participants, Their Data or Biological Material/Informed Consent This paper is based on research that does not involve human or animal participants.

Conflicts of Interests The authors declare no competing interests.

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