

Cultural-historical psychotherapy: In search of its niche¹

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The tenets of cultural-historical psychology provide an interesting perspective for the development of psychotherapy. However, article “Cultural-historical psychotherapy” (Venger & Morozova, 2012) provokes a number of questions that need to be answered in order to better clarify the proposed notion of cultural-historical psychotherapy, its specificity, and place among other psychotherapeutic practices. These are the questions:

1. Can there exist a universal, culture-independent psychotherapy or, in contrast, there must be own psychotherapeutic practice(s) within each specific culture?

Traditional healer who uses traditional tools and means of managing psychological processes quite successfully can tackle psychological problems. If a psychologist who claims to be using the conceptual tools of cultural-historical psychology in his psychotherapeutic practice uses traditional means of control over psychological processes (such as talismans, mantras, rituals, etc.), then the person in fact plays the role of a shaman or a healer.

In contrast, I would argue that psychotherapy still should be looking for universally valid and culture-independent principles of dealing with psychological problems. The search of such universal “psychological tools” was launched back in 1950s (Watts, 1961). No doubt, psychotherapist is bound to take into account local specificity, but ethno-cultural differences notwithstanding, human psyche in its functioning follows general and universal laws applicable to the entire species *Homo sapiens*.

2. What is a conception of human being and psychological health (i.e. the norm and pathology) in cultural-historical psychotherapy?

Psychotherapeutic practices are grounded in certain philosophical and ethical basis, and specifically—the image of a human being and the conception of the health and the pathology of human psyche. The paper “Cultural-historical psychotherapy” fails to discuss this image and clearly delineated distinctions between healthy and neurotic personality.

3. What are the methods and means of psychotherapeutic treatment in cultural-historical psychotherapy?

According to the proposal expressed in the paper, cultural-historical psychotherapist uses special external tools that help the patient to gain control over own psychological state. The proposed options for such tools, for instance, talismans or ballot, are fairly dubious.

¹ This is an abbreviated English version of a Russian paper by the same author (Latypov, 2012).

4. What is the role that the psychotherapist plays in the psychotherapeutic practice?

According to the paper “Cultural-historical psychotherapy”, psychotherapist plays the role of a personal instructor, and such role clearly determines the unequal positions of the client and the therapist. If psychotherapist plays this role, then the eventual transition from this model to that of the interaction between the therapist and the adult client as equals gets really problematic. According to this model, the responsibility gravitates strongly towards the psychotherapist, whereas the client is in secondary, submissive position of a learner, and is in fact infantilized.

Generally, the application of the ideas of cultural-historical psychology to psychotherapeutic practice has great potential; however, it is also important to explicate what new cultural-historical psychology can contribute to the practice of psychological care in comparison to other similar proposals. The future of cultural-historical psychotherapy largely depends on its ability to realize the originality and the novelty of this strand as distinct from other ones.

References:

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