

The Self in Cultural-Historical Activity Theory

Reclaiming the Unity of Social and Individual Dimensions of Human Development

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ABSTRACT. This paper suggests a framework in which the importance of the individual dimension and agency can be reclaimed within a profoundly social and relational view of the self. Juxtaposed with recent research on the self, cultural-historical activity theory is discussed, including its foundational premises formulated by Vygotsky and its conception of the self articulated by Leontiev. Expanded in a number of ways proposed in this paper, this theory helps to theorize the self (a) in its practical relevance, as a lawful and necessary moment in human collective practices, (b) as endowed with the capacity to generate new cycles of practice, and (c) as immanent in activities that position individuals to contribute to meaningfully changing the world. The concept of 'self as a leading activity' is discussed as a way to capture what the self is, where it is located, and what its purpose and relation to society are.

KEY WORDS: agency, cultural-historical activity theory, development, dialectical, Leontiev, personality, self, social-individual dichotomy, Vygotsky

Although much of psychology today remains devoted to the cognitivist agenda of studying human functioning as context-free information processing in individual minds, there is a powerful current of ideas, both in psychology and in neighboring disciplines, that contests the most cherished individualist assumptions of cognitivism. Perhaps more clearly than in any other field, the research on the self has witnessed a move away from the essentialist and context-independent notions of individual possessions (e.g. personality traits, attributes) toward viewing the self as being embedded within sociocultural contexts and intrinsically interwoven with them. The recent approaches to the self, although united in their quest to overcome the extreme individualism of traditional accounts by capitalizing on socio-cultural contexts, vary greatly in how the very notions of the self, context

and the relationship between the two are conceptualized. Whereas mainstream, cognitively oriented psychology continues to view the self as being only extraneously influenced by outside contexts, a number of newly evolving transactional approaches focus on relational and inherently social realms as producing the phenomena of human subjectivity. The latter approaches represent a progressive shift away from individualism not only of cognitivism but also of broader modes of traditional thinking that have prevailed in psychology.

However, as several authors have recently commented (e.g. Jenkins, 2001; Martin & Sugarman, 2000; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000), the goal of rendering an account of the self as a profoundly social phenomenon, yet at the same time as real, agentive and unique, remains to be achieved. One clear sign of persisting problems is that the newly emerging approaches remain isolated from each other and often do not find common grounds on which their insights could be integrated to produce a coherent conceptualization of the self.

This paper explores how cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT)¹, initially formulated by Vygotsky, Leontiev and their collaborators in the 1920s and 1930s, can be employed as a foundation for conceptualizing the self as an important agentive dimension within a profoundly social and relational view of human life and development. Re-conceptualized and expanded in a number of ways, discussed in this paper, this approach allows us to address *both individual (agentive) and social dimensions of the self* in a non-dichotomizing way and thus provides grounds for integrating progressive conceptual shifts in newly evolving conceptualizations of the self. The paper first charts these recent trends to create a context in which the distinctiveness of CHAT can be revealed. It then reconstructs the major tenets of CHAT, addresses certain gaps in it, and suggests ways to fill them (thus moving beyond what has become the 'canonical' CHAT), to then explore how the self can be conceptualized within this reconstructed and expanded theoretical framework.

Specifically, it will be argued that CHAT offers a non-reductionist ontological vision of human nature and development as being rooted in material social practices that, on the one hand, produce and engender social interactions and human subjectivity, and, on the other hand, are themselves reciprocally produced by these interactions and subjectivity. On the basis of such an account of social practice, this approach allows us (a) to resolve various dualisms that still permeate conceptualizations of human development, especially that of the social versus the individual, by explicating the principal ontological unity of inter-individual and intra-individual processes as being mutually dependent poles on the continuum of purposeful transformative practice and as both having a specific place and role within this practice; (b) to reveal specific mechanisms that account for transitions between the self and broader sociocultural processes; and (c) to define the

self as a subject of a unique constellation of activities in the real world reflected in a person's 'leading activity'. The overarching theme of this paper is that an expanded CHAT suggests a conceptualization that avoids the extremes of both the mentalist paradigm that limits the self to individual mental constructs and the tendencies of fusing the self and context with their relative disregard of human agency.

The Self and Social Context: Recent Trends and Persisting Controversies

There is hardly any concept that is intuitively more individualistic than the self. Indeed, this concept traditionally has been used in social sciences, including psychology, to convey the idea that human beings are autonomous (i.e. separate and distinctive) individuals with their own unique histories and experiences, who are capable of and responsible for planning, initiating and coherently carrying out important relationships and activities across contexts and life stages. Yet, paradoxically, perhaps no other field of research has been so profoundly shaped by the idea about the importance of social contexts and social interaction than research on the self. Influenced by groundbreaking insights achieved in the early 20th century by scholars such as James, Vygotsky, Baldwin, Mead and Bakhtin, most of today's conceptualizations present the self as embedded within social contexts. Although it is impossible to give an adequate treatment of all the approaches that emphasize social facets of the self, we will briefly address several presently influential trends in order to draw attention to some conceptual gaps that continue to divide them, so as to set the stage for a discussion of how activity theory can potentially contribute to the task of creating an integrated view of the self.

Self as a Mental Construct

The shift away from strictly individualist notions of human subjectivity and development is quite evident in today's mainstream psychology. Be it social cognitive (e.g. Harter, 1997), cognitive developmental (e.g. Case, 1991), social role-identity (e.g. Stryker & Statham, 1985) or cross-cultural theories (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the self is presented as being profoundly shaped by social factors such as interactive experiences with significant others and group membership, along with the roles and positions each individual occupies in society.

However, perhaps most characteristic of these approaches, the self is implied to be exclusively a mental phenomenon, reducible to self-concept, self-perception, self-esteem and other similar strictly cognitive and individual constructs. The lack of a firm ontological grounding for the self

anywhere outside individual cognitions inevitably results in conceptualizing it as being only extraneously influenced by social 'factors'. Individual cognitions and other mental constructs, conceived as the primary reality of analysis, do not permit conceptualizing how individual and social dimensions evolve together in the development of the self. Not surprisingly, such a position leads to enigmatic questions as to whether the self is primarily social *or* personal, and to answers that 'it is, obviously, a bit of both' (e.g. Jussim & Ashmore, 1997, p. 223). Moreover, the prevailing perception appears to be that 'there are liabilities associated with the construction of a personal self . . . highly dependent on social interaction' (Harter, 1997, p. 81).

Self as Fused with Context/Practice

An alternative movement inspired, among others, by Vygotsky, Wittgenstein and Bakhtin, and driven by considerations of ontological (as well general philosophical and methodological) entrapments of cognitivism, has taken the dialectical metaphor of transaction and relatedness as its principal theoretical grounding (for a review, see Altman & Rogoff, 1987). This movement encompasses a broad family of theories that focus on continuity and reciprocity between individuals and society in contradistinction to the Cartesian dichotomy of the individual and the world. Congruent with this broad commitment to studying the reality *between* human beings and the world, human development is conceptualized as located not 'under the skull' but in the processes of ongoing social transactions.

The ways in which these ongoing social transactions are specified in their mechanisms and their relationship to human development and the self demarcate diverse approaches within this vast movement that counters cognitivism and positivism. A number of recently influential theories essentially focus on the dynamics and movements of social transactions as the ultimate explanatory level of analysis and avoid articulating the role and purpose of human subjectivity, including the self, in producing this reality. For example, social constructionism (e.g. Gergen, 1994) suggests that the conceptual analysis of rhetorical devices and narrative conventions (e.g. traditional concepts of self and mind), as these are constructed and utilized in discourse, is the major avenue for exploring human life and development (cf. Engeström, 1999). Social discourse is taken to be an autonomous and omnipotent realm that produces human subjectivity and the self, and the latter are presented as ephemeral, fleeting and relatively powerless artifacts of social discourse (cf. Dunn, 1997; Holland, 1997; Stetsenko & Arievitch, 1997).

Another approach (e.g. Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Rogoff, 1990, 1994) addresses the relational character of human subjectivity as being produced by participation in a community. Learning and development are

conceptualized as evolving through the dynamics of such participation: for example, as movements from the fringes of a community to more centralized performances in that community. Unlike social constructionism, the transactional processes are conceptualized not as discourse but as the shifting and moving patterns of participation, drawing attention to the actual social practices and material sites of action as important sources of development.

A similarly dialectical and transactional conceptual turn is apparent in one version of activity theory, which suggests situated productive activity systems as a basic unit of analysis (e.g. Engeström, 1987, 1999). This brings to the fore the processes beyond discourse and participation, most importantly, the practical tasks that give rise to communities of practice and divisions of labor. Such an approach provides a firm ontological grounding to account for human development as being rooted in clearly defined patterns of social practice. The analysis focuses on the *collective* dynamics of shifting divisions of labor, roles, mediating artifacts and rules of participation, whereas the role that individual psychological processes might play in this dynamic is relatively neglected.

These transactional approaches continue to play an important role in overcoming the profoundly essentialist and dualist modes of thinking about human development that reify it as fixed, predetermined and independent from the social processes of its construction. Important differences among them notwithstanding, these approaches also converge in that they do not focus either on how particular selves are produced, or on the active role that the self might play in the production of discourse, community and society itself (cf. Linehan & McCarthy, 2000; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Ultimately, these approaches arrive at a curious form of a 'reductionism upwards' (cf. Dunn, 1997), whereby the self is dissolved in the collective dynamics of social processes.

Dialogical Approaches

Yet another line of inquiry marks an important trend in recent theorizing about the self. Like transactional approaches, it also challenges the dichotomous notions of cognitivism and proposes to conceive the self not as a phenomenon of individual minds but as a relational dialogical process between individuals. Characteristic of this perspective, furthermore, is that a strong emphasis is placed on revealing specific mechanisms producing human subjectivity, and that the latter is accorded its own status stretching beyond the collective level of analysis. For example, the self is described as formed by collective voices and dialogues (a stance similar to social constructionism and participatory approaches), but, in addition, as existing in a dynamic multiplicity of I-positions in the landscape of the mind, intertwined with the minds of other people (Hermans, 2002). A somewhat similar view is proposed by Valsiner (2002), who defines the self as an

autocatalytic system that regulates, through semiotic mediation, the relations between perspectival positions within the self as a field. Another approach (Penuel & Wertsch, 1995) also employs dialogical notions to theorize the self and identity by emphasizing the mediational means or cultural tools and signs that shape identity in the course of action (also Wertsch, 1991). Specifically, the sense of self is postulated to be produced in the flow of rhetorical actions as these incorporate signs, providing individuals with terms for talking about themselves, and thus essentially constituting the self.

These dialogical approaches do not evade self-reflective, conscious dimensions of human subjectivity, while at the same time acknowledging that selves are essentially constructed in the profoundly relational processes of speaking and listening to others. Such a conceptual direction parallels a recently evolving anthropological perspective in which social discourses are theorized as cultural tools used by agentive actors who author and orchestrate their own selves (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001). These approaches appear to be well positioned to avoid the extremes of either dissolving the self in the workings of social forces or reducing it to purely mental phenomena of the individual mind that are only extraneously influenced by social factors. However, the principal ontological grounding for the self in these approaches is seen as constituted by the relatedness, dialogism and responsiveness of human life as its ultimate and often exhaustive characteristic. For example, some take Mead's claim of human 'instinctual ability' to coordinate actions as the basis of their approach (Holland et al., 2001, p. 4), while others capitalize on Bakhtin's notions of interrelatedness of human voices. Also, the dialogical approaches in psychology continue to focus predominantly on language, dialogues and other discursive processes as being the sites where selves are produced and on internalized forms of rhetorical activity as the ultimate reality of self. What remains to be further explored is (a) whether and how the genuinely constructive and practical material processes, as these have emerged in phylogeny and continue to evolve in human history, are implicated in producing and defining the dialogical realm of human interactions and human subjectivity, and (b) the reciprocally constitutive role of human subjectivity and the self in the emergent reality of social practice, dialogical interactions and human life.

It is these questions that cultural-historical activity theory puts at the core of conceptualizing the self. As discussed in the following sections, this theory offers a historically, phylogenetically and ontogenetically grounded account of how transformative collective material practices constitute the very foundation of human social life, producing and reciprocally being produced by social interactions and human selves. Thus, it arguably provides a strong foundation (although not without some internal contradictions, as discussed below) on which many recent developments in theorizing the self

potentially can be united in a practice-based, non-dualist account of both its social and agentic dimensions.

Cultural-Historical Activity Theory: The Canonical Version

Although Vygotsky's theory is often associated with the idea that human psychological processes are embedded in and defined by sociocultural contexts, this approach in fact also laid foundations for and itself contained elements of a much broader perspective on human development that can be termed cultural-historical activity theory. Initially developed in the 1920s and 1930s, in close collaboration between Lev S. Vygotsky and several of his co-workers and followers, most prominently A.N. Leontiev and A.R. Luria, this theory was further elaborated in the many years after Vygotsky's death within what can be called the Vygotskian school with its distinctive investigative project. This project united several generations of psychologists (first in Russia, e.g. Bozhovich, Elkonin, Galperin, Davydov, and then on an international scale; for a most recent example, see Chaiklin, 2001) and was aimed at constructing a practice-oriented psychology suited to solve real-life problems within the overall quest for a humane and just society. Although CHAT, as based on but extending beyond what is known as Vygotsky's theory, is now beginning to make inroads into the English language literature (e.g. Burkitt, 1991; Cole, Engeström, & Vasques, 1997; Engeström, Miettinen & Punamaeki, 1999; Glassmann, 1996; Wertsch, 1981), its main ideas and overall potential are far from being fully explored and communicated to the broad community of psychologists and social scientists in the West. This is also, and perhaps especially, true of the activity theory of self. Importantly, CHAT is not a fully fledged conception without internal contradictions, unresolved tensions and substantive gaps.² These will be addressed below in a reconstruction that will draw upon works by Vygotsky and his followers, especially A.N. Leontiev, but will also expand on their ideas, making them speak and contribute to today's debates on the self.

Grounding Assumptions of CHAT

The activity theory perspective fully acknowledges the sociocultural origin and nature of human subjectivity (i.e. broadly conceived human psychological processes that include cognition, self-regulation, emotion and self). This perspective, however, does not begin with this assumption and cannot be reduced to it. Instead, the grounding premises of activity theory are much broader. At its most fundamental level, and drawing on groundbreaking works by physiologists in the late 19th and early 20th century (e.g. Sechenov, Sherrington, Pavlov and, later, Anokhin and Bernstein), activity

theory states that each living organism exists only as part of a dynamic system that connects it with the environment and with other organisms (note some similarity with the recently influential dynamic systems theory, e.g. Thelen & Smith, 1998). It is the open-ended, ongoing exchange with the environment that constitutes the foundation of life for all living organisms, and it is also this ongoing process of exchange that calls for and gives rise to regulatory mechanisms that allow it to be carried out. Much of activity theory is devoted to exploring how more and more refined mechanisms of regulation, including increasingly complex psychological processes, have emerged in phylogeny as a result of an evolving complexity of exchanges between organisms and their environments that, in turn, resulted from evolutionary pressures to adapt to the ever-growing demands of life (e.g. A.N. Leontiev, 1959/1981).

Of more immediate relevance for the theory of self is how this general idea is explicated regarding the specifically human forms of life and their psychological regulation. According to CHAT (which in this respect draws on Engels, 1873–83/1961), the historical processes of human development (i.e. the development of civilization), although emerging out of phylogenetically prior forms of animal life, represent a unique form of evolution that goes beyond adaptation to the demands of physical environments. These historical processes, also termed cultural evolution—to emphasize both their radical difference from *and* their continuity with biological evolution—are based on active transformations of existing environments and the creation of new ones. These transformations are achieved through human labor, that is, a collective and collaborative (i.e. social) use of *tools*, in which individual efforts are necessarily blended to produce, deploy and preserve the efficient tools, as well as pass them on to new generations. Human labor has led to unprecedented gains for humans, allowing for far more flexible and efficient forms of life than did more biologically based mechanisms of adaptation in the animal world.

From simple material instruments to more complex ones such as human knowledge and technological know-how, the tools reflect ways of mastering specific classes of tasks discovered in collaborative practices. Because tools come to embody these ways in material and symbolic forms, they constitute a new and unique dimension of existence—human culture. For example, language represents a tool par excellence as it emerges out of and serves the purposes of coordinating, planning and organizing the complex processes of collective production and deployment of tools. Importantly, in the course of human evolution, the tools come to reify the collective experiences (e.g. knowledge, memory, skills) that can be passed to subsequent generations, not through genetic mechanisms but by means of specially organized teaching and learning processes in which these tools are re-introduced to and re-discovered by each succeeding generation. In these socially and historically specific cultural processes, people not only constantly transform and

create their environment; they also create and constantly transform their lives, consequently changing themselves in fundamental ways and, in the process, gaining self-knowledge.

These collaborative processes of human labor or human social practice—as practical social purposeful activities aimed at transforming the world and human beings themselves with the help of collectively created tools—are the basic and the principal form of human life that lies at the very foundation and is formative of everything that is distinctly human.

Importantly (and here is the similarity with Marxist theory, and through it, with Hegel and Feuerbach), collective labor inevitably gives rise to processes of social exchange among people, on the one hand, and to human subjectivity, on the other. In the course of history, these two types of processes (society and human subjectivity) become increasingly and enormously complex, even assuming—as emerging properties—their own levels of quasi-ontological existence. For example, being derivative from the processes of material production, the social relations among people gain such importance and complexity that they greatly influence each and every individual participant in these relations (this was Vygotsky's great insight; cf. his famous law that all intrasubjective processes first originate as intersubjective ones, e.g. Vygotsky, 1978). Similarly, human subjectivity (e.g. thoughts, emotions) achieves such levels of elaborateness that it exerts a powerful influence on all that people do in life. Therefore, in a static and superficial observation, social relations and human subjectivity might appear as self-sufficient, mysterious and detached from mundane material practices of life.

That the historical origins of the self and social interactions are located in collective practices of material production does not mean that their phenomenological richness or agency is denied. What is denied is that the self and society appear and develop on their own grounds, from within themselves, as realities completely separate from material life and its production. Instead, the primacy of material practice means that analyses of the richness and agency of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity, to be efficient, need to keep in sight their ultimate origination from and embeddedness in material processes of human practice. It is in this sense that the human 'essence' is not something abstractly inherent in an individual but 'the totality of all social relations' (Marx, 1888/1955, p. 3; note that social relations are not simply interactions among people but the totality of ways in which humans relate to the world, other people and themselves, as they produce the world and are produced by it).

Thus, human subjectivity and the self are viewed, from an activity theory perspective, not as some mysterious capacity that exists in individual heads, evolves on its own, purely mentalist, grounds, and develops according to some inherent laws of nature. Instead, psychological intra-psychological processes are conceptualized as emerging, together with interactional inter-

psychological processes, from the *collective practical involvements* of humans with the world around them and as subordinate to the purposes and goals of these practical involvements.

These broad issues of how human subjectivity and development are produced in and by human historical practice lie at the heart of both Vygotsky and his followers' versions of CHAT (albeit at various degrees of explicitness). An important, although not pivotal, difference between Vygotsky and further works within this school of thought (e.g. by Leontiev) also should not be overlooked. Whereas for Vygotsky the concept of mediation by cultural artifacts and the relation between intersubjective and intrasubjective processes was at the forefront of analysis, Leontiev moved in the direction of explicating how practical forms of activity give rise to psychological processes such as the self (cf. Glassman, 1996; Miettinen, 1999).

The Self in A.N. Leontiev's works

Within CHAT, the issue of self (or personality, in CHAT terminology) has been most explicitly addressed by A.N. Leontiev, especially in his last book (1975/1983a). The crux of Leontiev's approach is his idea that the self originates in actual processes of human activity and develops within transformations of its structures, including prioritization among various elements of object-oriented activity. Paraphrasing Leontiev (1975/1983a, pp. 165, 171), the human self has no history, and no logic of functioning and developing, beyond the history and logic of functioning and developing of human practical purposeful activity.

To account for the complex dynamics that exist among various levels of activity and lead to the production of human subjectivity, including the self, Leontiev (1975/1983a) employed the notion of a 'twofold transition' (p. 144). This notion referred to (a) the transition from the world (in all the complexity of its dimensions) into the process of practical goal-oriented activity, and (b) the transition from activity into its subjective product—human mind and the self. That is, on the one hand, activity is molded by the world (i.e. in a simple example, holding a given object requires that this act complies with the properties of this object), thus also 'absorbing' and embodying the world in its dynamics and structures. On the other hand, activity crystallizes in its product—human subjectivity and self (i.e. the patterns of holding an object become reflected in the subjective image of this object), which develop as essential components of activity. Thus, the notion of two-fold transitions emphasizes the constant flow of activity as the source of mind and self. It also reveals the self as a product, or crystallization of activity processes, that always remains in direct contact with reality. In Leontiev's (1975/1983a) words, 'appearing in direct contacts with objective

reality and subordinate to it, activity is modified and enriched, and in that enrichment it is crystallized in a product' (p. 168).

Such a conceptualization provides a solid foundation for viewing human subjectivity as stemming from and existing within activity processes and thus eliminates the dichotomy of internal versus external processes. It also cogently reveals the inherent dynamism of human subjectivity as immersed in the flow of transitions between individuals and the world. These two fundamentally important ideas permeate Leontiev's writings and form their central core. They also reveal a strong similarity, at the level of rejecting the Cartesian dichotomy of individuals and the world, external and internal, between CHAT and the transactional approaches described in previous sections.

The CHAT perspective sheds new light on a number of fundamental issues in psychology, such as that of 'nature versus nurture'. Within CHAT, the processes of activity are revealed as enabled and constrained by unique contextual conditions facing each individual (e.g. as a result of living in a given historical epoch and environment), on the one hand, and by individual facts and forces (e.g. facts of birth such as sex or type of temperament), on the other. However, both types of influences—contextual and individual—are only initial preconditions that cannot in and of themselves produce or shape the self in any significant way. Leontiev staunchly argued against alternative dualistic explanations of human development as being influenced by the effects of biological and social factors *per se*, as if these were forces separate from each other and from activity. According to activity theory, the two-factorial models of development that attempt to account for social and biological influences, in any combination and relative prioritization of these forces, miss the very mechanism driving the development of human subjectivity. To study and understand this mechanism requires paying attention to the dynamics of activity in which contextual and individual forces are absorbed and transformed on the grounds of, and following the logic of, unfolding activity processes. Activity processes, forming the principal foundation of human life, ultimately drive the epigenesis of human subjectivity, including the self and mind, in unique constellations for each individual human being (see A.N. Leontiev, 1975/1983a, pp. 190, 191).

Leontiev's (1975/1983a) example of a person born with a physical defect such as a hip anomaly illustrates this point. Although such an inborn feature can dramatically influence an individual's self, its effects are neither direct nor predetermined. Rather, these effects only come about through particular constellations of activity that are carried out by the person with a certain physical deficiency. Thus, a child with a hip anomaly might not be able to participate in many everyday activities with peers and instead be prone to engage in some alternative endeavors such as academic pursuits. Furthermore, the choice and character of these pursuits are greatly influenced by social forces such as access to cultural resources, parental influences, and so

on. However, the patterns of endeavors and activities that the child engages in, although initially influenced by the presence of a certain inborn feature and by diverse social forces and affordances, gradually evolve into a complex ongoing reality *sui generis* with its own logic and internal dynamics that ultimately gives rise to and shapes the child's emerging self.

The self therefore is not a mere ramification of either social or biological forces, or their combination, that act upon individuals. Yet, according to activity theory, the self is profoundly sociocultural and historical. This is so not simply because the self is somehow 'situated' (or embedded) in a sociocultural world, but because it is produced from within, out of, and as driven by the logic of evolving activity that connects individuals to the world, to other people, and to themselves. And because human activities are always essentially collaborative and social processes, the self represents 'the subject of societal relations' (Leontiev, 1975/1983a, p. 195) and serves the purposes of orienting in social reality of human life. As such, the self only emerges in the history of humankind and of each individual when collective collaborative practices evolve to require certain selves and it represents a relatively late product of social-historical development (Leontiev, 1975/1983a, p. 196).³ Arguably, this principle could be used to expand the recent analyses of historical processes that give rise to the self (e.g. Baumeister, 1997) to include not only ideological and discursive realms but also a broader spectrum of human social practices.

Because Leontiev conceptualized the self as an integral moment within activity processes, his descriptions focused on revealing the underlying dynamics of activity components, especially its motives and goals. Leontiev's central claim here (e.g. 1975/1983a, pp. 179, 217) is that each activity is driven by certain motives that distinguish one activity from another, and that motives stem not from inside individuals (e.g. as direct outcomes of individual needs, pure will or free choices), but are essentially objects of a material world.

What Leontiev likely wanted to achieve by introducing the notion of object-motive was to convey the idea that human activities are always driven by something objectively existing in the world, rather than by some events and occurrences in the hidden realm of mental processes or human soul. Positing motives, these ultimate molders of activity and the self, in the outside world (i.e. in the world of 'objects') was yet another expression of Leontiev's profoundly materialist view of human development with its foundational principle about the primacy of the social material production of human life and about human needs, desires and motives as being derivative from this production.

In his more specific characterization of the self, Leontiev (1975/1983a) established a number of principles of its development and functioning. Namely, according to Leontiev, the self develops as diverse activities carried

out by individuals begin to relate to each other, forming certain 'hierarchies of motives', in which these activities become juxtaposed and prioritized (pp. 202–208). The scope of activities pursued by a given person and the way these activities become relatively prioritized among themselves (in a fluent, ever-changing balance of diverse motives) is the immediate reality of the self, with the latter appearing as a fluid process itself (p. 168). In addition, because motives that drive human activity are always socially produced by human collaborative practices, any individual activity bears the birthmarks of and reflects these collaborative practices, never becoming completely isolated from the social processes that gave rise to it.

Objects–motives become parts of individualized activity processes due to individual participation in collective activities (starting from, in most elementary forms, mother–child shared activities). However, the real 'psychological' life of motives only begins through and at the level of individualized goal-directed activities (termed 'actions' by Leontiev). Motives are never directly posited in individuals; they need, and can become actualized in, the transitions from motives onto the goals pursued by individuals. Thus, Leontiev (e.g. 1975/1983a, p. 217) provides examples of how motives can 'shift' onto goals and how social meanings are re-worked into personal senses—both accounts indicative of his attempts, not always consistent and perhaps therefore often misunderstood, to overcome the dualism of social and individual levels. Individual biological needs are also not discounted in activity theory but are seen as having to first 'enter' into activity and encounter their objects in order to then become transformed into motives and be able to direct activity. In this sense, human needs, like motives and goals, are produced and brought to life by human social practice.

This positioning of motives outside the individual, so counterintuitive from the traditional point of view, is logical and inevitable within CHAT with its foundational principle about the primacy of collaborative processes of material activity. From a developmental perspective, both in the history of human civilization and in ontogeny, these collective processes of activity (and objects-as-motives produced in them) are always primary vis-à-vis their more individualized forms carried out by particular human beings in their goal-directed actions. This idea was at the base of viewing human psychological processes ('psychic reflection', in Leontiev's terminology) as object-related, in opposition to conceptualizing them as a solipsistic internal mental realm. This is the crux of Leontiev's approach and his major contribution to a materialist, non-reductionist theory of the self.

Although the self, as conceptualized by Leontiev (1975/1983a), appears to be driven by some sort of 'self-movements of activity' (p. 199), human subjectivity is also acknowledged as playing an important role in mediating these movements of activity and reflecting their hierarchy, entailing 'a special internal movement of consciousness' (p. 218).

To summarize, Leontiev's account of the self—as being a moment in the dynamic flow of activity that connects individuals to the world around them and to themselves—has a number of conceptual strengths. Similarly to transactional perspectives briefly discussed in previous sections, Leontiev portrays human development as profoundly social and not reducible to any process 'inside' the individual. Furthermore, he too views social transactions as the primary focus of analysis, laying foundations for overcoming the old 'metaphysics of things' in the dichotomies of internal versus external and of process versus product. Another strength of Leontiev's account is that, unlike some versions of transactionism, he does not avoid the difficult proposition that human individual agency and the self do exist within the ongoing, and profoundly social, transactions in the world. This view likens Leontiev's account with the previously addressed dialogical views on the self that strive to avoid reducing it to sociological, and therefore supra-individual, levels of analysis.

Leontiev's unique contribution to the transactional view of the self should also not be underestimated. His account is based on an ontologically coherent, that is, phylogenetically, historically and ontogenetically grounded, view of human development as based on and derivative from the processes of material production that engenders both social relations among people and individual subjectivity, including the self. This view provides a non-reductionist ontological foundation for conceptualizing the self as emerging within the broader social reality of transformative social practices and specifies a number of mechanisms in the development of the self (e.g. the two-fold transitions and the hierarchization of motives of activity). However, Leontiev's account remained insufficiently elaborated in a number of aspects (as noted by Leontiev himself in his very last works, e.g. 1976/1983b, p. 385) that need to be explored and addressed in a search for a conception of the self that is viable and relevant to today's challenges.

Reclaiming the Unity of Individual and Social Dimensions in Human Development: Moving Beyond the Canonical CHAT

Based on the foundational principles of Leontiev's theory, we will now attempt to expand and specify his ideas to address what is arguably the most contested and unresolved issue in his works (cf. Davydov, 1998), and in so many current accounts of human development, even those based in Vygotsky's works (e.g. Cole & Wertsch, 1996)⁴. Namely, we will explore the possible ways to conceptualize (a) individual and societal levels as *both* implicated in human development and (b) the agentive self as being possible *and* necessary within the profoundly transactional view.

*Restoring the Practical Relevance of Human Subjectivity
Alongside the Primacy and Human Relevance of Material Social
Practice*

Conceptualizing material social practice and activities that realize this practice as the foundation of human subjectivity is Leontiev's substantial contribution to the materialist theory of the self. However, his broad materialist formulations emphasize a one-sided dependence of the self on the material production of human life and associated societal forms of exchanges between people. Indeed, human subjectivity is conceptualized by Leontiev as subordinate to, and originating from, collective exchanges and material production, and much less as a force that itself plays an active role in these processes. Although Leontiev did occasionally mention the generally active role of the self, his portrayal leaves an overall impression of omnipotent social sources that act at the expense of individual agency. Particularly indicative of this imbalance is that Leontiev's theory revolves around the notions of individuals *acquiring* cultural norms and experiences of previous generations and speaks much less about the active agentive role of the self in transforming and further developing these norms and experiences (see, e.g., Leontiev, 1975/1983a, pp. 133, 179). As a result, the self in Leontiev's exposition appears as most often a product of and, at best, a participant in collaborative processes of social life, but much less as a force that enacts and *contributes* to this life, being its indispensable agentive moment and driving force.

It should be emphasized that Leontiev did not take the processes through which individuals acquire (or appropriate, *usvaivajut*) culture to be an automatic imprinting of information onto passive individuals, as is clear from the following quote: 'The process of internalization is not the transferral of an external activity to a pre-existing, internal "plane of consciousness": it is the process in which this internal plane is formed' (A.N. Leontiev, 1975/1983a, p. 151). The same point is formulated even more forcefully when Leontiev states that the self is not 'the result of a direct layering of external influences; rather, it appears as something that humans make of themselves, affirming their humanness' (p. 225). That is, the self, in Leontiev's account, is actively appropriating the culture by making it an integral part of one's own psychological functioning and one's own instrument for future activities. However, another meaning in which individuals are active agents of their own development and the development of the humanity—as not only subjects who appropriate culture but as actors who create and constantly change it—was relatively disregarded by Leontiev. Namely, the active role of individuals in changing and creating culture itself, in its worldly ('ideal') form that exists for other people beyond its personal incarnation of individual instrumentality, was much less addressed by

Leontiev and his followers (for further details, see Stetsenko, 1995, in press). This omission reflected Leontiev's broader principled stance that

. . . the chief task is *by far* not to point to the active, regulating role of consciousness. The chief task is to understand consciousness as a *subjective product*, as a transformed expression of those, social in nature, relations, that become realized by humans in the objective world. (A.N. Leontiev, 1975/1983a, p. 168, emphasis added)

Such a relatively 'passive' self and consciousness in the otherwise transactional conception of human development likely resulted, and quite understandably so, from Leontiev's overall motivation to overcome the extremely individualistic notions of the self and personality that dominated the psychological discourse of his time. Like some transactional approaches today, Leontiev appears to be so fully absorbed by the truly important struggle against individualism in psychology that the agentive self unwittingly, and perhaps inevitably—due to a rhetorical need to establish an opposition to individualism in somewhat extreme terms at the early stages in combating it—becomes a casualty in his account of human development. That Leontiev was perhaps influenced by the rather unidirectional version of communal ideology that at the time dominated Soviet society should also not be overlooked. This ideology, itself stemming from the broader socio-political context in that country, myopically disregarded individual contributions to societal processes and instead relied on the central planning economy and top-down commands as a foundation for social engineering and progress.

An important idea that Leontiev did not seem to emphasize enough (and perhaps to fully appreciate) is that human subjectivity, the collective processes of material production and social interactions all co-evolve as parts of a unified system constitutive of human social life, interpenetrating and influencing each other, while never becoming completely detached or independent from each other. The primacy of material practice notwithstanding, all three represent processes that are dialectically connected, that is, are dependent upon and condition each other, with this dialectical relation emerging and becoming more and more complex in human history and in the development of each individual.

Introducing the notion of such an interrelated system entails the principal dialectical unity (though not equivalence) of human subjectivity, social relations and material practice as having the same ontological grounding. This is possible if collective practices of material production are understood as being supported by diverse mechanisms that organize, enact and support these practices. Namely, these mechanisms include (a) a human society that regulates exchanges between individuals necessary to carry out collective practices of material production at the inter-subjective level, and (b) human psychological processes that regulate individual participation in collective

practices at intra-subjective levels. In this case, a continuum is outlined from inter-individual to intra-individual processes, which are viewed as not only stemming from but *also participating* in and contributing to collective material practice, essentially enacting this practice, at the same time as the social collective practice enacts them. Then the self and society both appear as emergent properties (i.e. transformations) of the same reality—the social practice of material tool production, albeit differing in degree of generality, power and, most importantly, role in the genesis of social life, with the inter-subjective level of practice being historically and ontogenetically prior to the intra-subjective level.

This idea is further consistent with the understanding that human subjectivity, emerging within and out of activity, is not an end-product, not a ‘final destination’ of ever-expanding human practices. In fact, it never is a final destination. Even when the subjective pole of activity dominates and seems to exhaust all other dimensions, such as in the scholarly activity of theory-building, which might appear as completely detached from mundane practices, this ‘theoretical’ subjective pole is an important participant in and contributor (relatively fleeting or durable) to certain social practices and collaborative exchanges between a scholar and the world. Even in such cases, and essentially in all meaningful activities, human subjectivity emerges as an inherent moment in the constantly unfolding activities that is objectively needed to regulate activity and further carry it out. In this sense any human activity, in any of its components, even in its seemingly ‘pure’ theoretical forms, has a *practical relevance*, ultimately contributing to real-life processes and practices in the world.

Establishing human subjectivity and the self in their practical relevance, as playing an important role in enacting and developing social practices and human life, helps to further elaborate on the claim by Leontiev (and by some prominent philosophers who worked in parallel with Leontiev, especially Evald Ilyenkov, e.g. 1977)⁵ that activity processes can externalize themselves in the materiality of reified forms that come to embody human practice. Namely, if human subjectivity and the self are revealed to be important and agentive constituents of social practice, then they can be seen as contributing to these reified forms of activity. Such conceptualization helps to avoid a somewhat one-sided emphasis that both Leontiev and Ilyenkov placed on the processes in which social practices reify themselves in idealized forms of human culture, in relative disregard of the notion that these forms can be revealed only when being *again* involved in human practice, while being enacted by individual people who not only ‘consume’ but also inevitably contribute to these ideal forms (for detailed examples, see Stetsenko, 1995, in press). For example, the most vivid creations of social practice, such as language and art, are the products and carriers of practice and human subjectivity but *only* when re-enacted (or re-constructed) in new rounds of ever-expanding cycles of practice by real people in their real lives.

It is in this sense that, for example, words and music are mute unless someone again and anew re-enacts them, thus becoming ideal and alive for a particular person (cf. Bakhtin, 1981, for a similar emphasis, although derived from a different set of premises). In this case, human activity appears as entailing both internalization and externalization as essentially interdependent and mutually constitutive mechanisms that realize transitions among various planes of activity.

It is in light of reinstating the objective role and practical relevance of human subjectivity and the self, along with the human relevance of material social practice, that the individual and the world cease to be separate realities. Instead, they appear as moments of the same process, now *manifold* (not just two-fold, as Leontiev held), of activity development. That is, the objective world (i.e. 'objects') appears as being posited in the body of object-related activity processes that produce, out of the same body, human subjectivity and the self, which always returns to and acts back on the world, again through activity, transforming the world according to human goals and, thus, creates a humanized world that can then shape new activity cycles in a constantly unfolding, never-ending, open-ended process of life.

Furthermore, the emphasis on manifold and ever-expanding cycles of social practices as entailing human subjectivity and self *in them*, as an inherent moment and mechanism of enacting and further developing social practices, means that new turns in social life can be brought about (at least in historically and ontogenetically mature forms of life) by any of its moments, including the self. This idea is particularly important because it reveals human subjectivity as endowed with the capacity to generate new cycles of activity (as well as, no doubt, distort the reality, but never completely break away from it).⁶ This is the broad ontological foundation and the rationale for conceptualizing the self as an agentive (i.e. able to generate change and novelty) actor within the continuum of unfolding activity processes. Taking this continuum seriously, therefore, helps to concretize the view that people are simultaneously molded by society and also mold society; that they are created by history but also create their own history.

Expanding the principles of CHAT along these lines sheds a new light on Leontiev's conceptualization of motives and goals. Positing that human subjectivity is a part of a mutually interdependent system of transitions within social practices, goals and motives inevitably appear as co-evolving. That is, they appear as existing (in historically and ontogenetically mature forms of practice) together, as co-constituting moments in the ever-shifting balances and mutual penetrations of ongoing activities. Not only do the socialized (but never completely de-individualized) motives of communal practices appear as powerful molders of individualized (but never de-socialized) goals in a top-down type of influence, as Leontiev suggested, but also the goals turn out to be molders of motives, in more bottom-up processes. The goals then appear to be dynamic and transformable, poten-

tially feeding not only from but also *into* motives, in an ever-shifting balance of mutual transitions within the system of ‘motives–objects–goals’. Thus, again, the agentive role of individuals as active molders of their own and social life at large is emphasized.

The Self as a Leading Activity

The suggested emphasis on the practical relevance of the self can be used to strengthen and expand on a number of points in Leontiev’s theory to make more salient the idea that individual and social dimensions are dialectically interrelated in human development. These changes can perhaps be best summed up by introducing the concept of *the self as a leading activity*, namely as a process of real-life activity that most explicitly positions individuals to meaningfully contribute to the ongoing social collaborative practices in the world.

Like the notions of self as stemming from and existing *in* activity (A.N. Leontiev, 1975/1983a) or the ‘self-*in*-action’ (Holland, 1997), the self *as* a leading activity is also based on its clear grounding in real-life practices in the world. Continuing Leontiev’s line of thought, the self is taken to be a process rather than an attribute, and, moreover, a process that connects individuals to the social world around them and serves the purposes of organizing these social connections and ties. Furthermore, conceptualizing the self as a leading activity also upholds the view that the self represents a moment in ongoing social activities that is not stored somewhere in the depths of a human soul, but is constantly re-enacted and constructed by individuals anew in the ever-shifting balances of life. This concept continues the gist of Leontiev’s approach also in that a unique ‘gravitation pole’ for the self is suggested—albeit a flexible and dynamic one, constantly evolving and changing, but not without a direction and a hierarchy. (Leontiev [1975/1983a] conveyed this meaning by referring to the self as being ‘a relatively stable configuration of principal motivational lines’, or as having ‘a principal motive’, see pp. 223, 224). Finally, conceptualizing the self as a leading activity elaborates on Leontiev’s concept of leading activity as a dominant relationship of the child to her environment that defines each stage of mental development in early ontogeny (A.N. Leontiev, 1959/1981; developed in parallel with Elkonin, 1974/1989). Even though this concept was limited in that it was employed to illustrate how young children are positioned by mighty social forces to develop one or the other leading activity (e.g. play, learning), and not how people can position themselves to meaningfully contribute to the world, it did capture the kernel of ideas discussed below. Along with these similarities, however, the self as a leading activity conveys more clearly the following ideas.

First, this concept capitalizes on the idea that it is the processes of collaborative *transformative* practices that constitute the primary reality

necessitating and producing the self. Understanding that people always contribute to social practices, rather than merely participate in or sustain them, places activities that allow individuals to purposefully transform the world at the very core of the self. That is, the self appears as made up of real-life processes and as oriented toward real-life practical tasks and pursuits of *changing something in and about the world* (including in oneself as part of the world). In other words, the self appears as an activity and instrument of transforming the world, as an instrument of social change. In this sense, paradoxically, the self can be viewed as completely 'de-centered' in that it is not reducible to any individual processes and in effect transcends the individual. That is, the self appears as having to do not (at least not automatically) with the person as such and not with what are traditionally seen as personal aspects (e.g. body, character, individual traits). Instead, the self appears as having to do with the world and what the person aims to change and transform in it, sometimes by stifling and resisting change. This can be any aspect of life, including its narrowly personal aspects (e.g. one's body), but only in so far as such aspects happen to represent the *leading level* at which an individual's connections to the world, to other people and to oneself are realized. For example, a person whose life happens to completely hinge upon his or her appearance might become personally invested in pursuing 'perfect looks' to the extent of turning this into a leading activity and thus making his or her life into an endless race for beauty and fitness.

Second, the self as a leading activity captures well that the self is not something that comes on top of an individual's engagement with the social world, but *is this very engagement*. That is, this notion conveys that social productive activities in the world are not reifications of the self but the 'real work' in which the self is born, constructed and enacted. Therefore, to conceptualize the self as a leading activity is to emphasize that it is constituted by the ways in which we 'do' and perform, rather than have, a self, and, moreover, by what we do about the world (thus transcending ourselves), as we engage in activities that contribute to changing something in and about the world. In this sense, the self can be also described as an embodiment of a *meaningful life project* (or of a search and, sometimes, even a lack thereof) that reflects and also organizes the most significant aspects of one's life.

These processes of 'doing' the self, so clearly conveyed by the notion of it being a leading *activity*, include the ways by which people respond to challenges and conflicts in their lives, how they internalize, interpret and also further develop the sociocultural rules and standards of what it takes to be a human being. Thus, the self is highly dependent on the existing array and accessibility of cultural resources as well as highly susceptible to issues of power and contestation. Moreover, the self as a leading activity presumes that social collaborative activities are subjectivized to often include internal

dialogues and other rhetorical actions as parts and workings of the self. These rhetorical actions are powerful mechanisms of carrying out real-life processes in coherent and consistent ways. However, the self is not reducible to rhetorical actions, dialogues and narratives per se. For these actions to become part of the self, and for analysts to access the self through them, they need to be revealed in their practical relevance, that is, in their role in the totality of individual life, and interpreted in the light of individuals' major meaningful pursuits that allow (or sometimes do not allow) them to contribute to communal forms of life. One interesting caveat is that individuals might not always be aware of how exactly their activities contribute to the world, or they might be in a constant search for such activities, struggling to make sense of their lives through internal dialogues and personal narratives. However, the lack of awareness and the often continuous struggles to find a meaningful leading activity notwithstanding, people always *do* contribute to something that goes on in the world, even if only on a small scale, and even if by doing nothing (because the latter type of a 'contribution' often helps to perpetuate the existing status quo and to stifle changes in society). Therefore, ultimately, what it is that the person is positioned by his or her activities to change in the world and oneself as part of the world—what kind of an objective in the world she or he contributes to—is the pivotal question, the answer to which reveals the uniqueness and integrity of each individual, that is, her or his 'self'.

The third thread that gains in prominence when the self is conceptualized as a leading activity is that the otherwise value-neutral theories of the self (even in dialogical and transactional approaches) are opened up to include moral dimensions as its inherent components. Viewing the self as an activity that brings about and carries out individual's contributions to the world places the emphasis on the self as value- and commitment-laden. The self appears as produced and achieved only from a certain *standpoint* in regard to concrete sociopolitical and cultural-historical as well as personal circumstances of a shared social life. Thus, taking a moral stand, speaking and acting from a commitment to certain goals and ideals, becomes the ultimate expression of how individual agency participates and is implicated in social life. Moreover, it is not only answerability to certain contexts and conditions that existed in the past or exist now that needs to be accounted for. The addressivity of human subjectivity and the self vis-à-vis future objectives clearly comes into the picture as each individual not only answers to past or present conditions, but also envisions future ones, contributing to their creation as they evolve in the fabric of social life (cf. Bakhtin, 1929/1973, 1981; see also Hicks, 2000).

Are we not then slipping back into the individualistic discourse of free choices, moral commitments, values, and the like? That would be the case only if these choices and commitments were conceived as individualized mental endeavors. This is not what the logic of activity theory suggests.

Making choices, taking moral stances and other so-called 'mental processes' can and should themselves be conceptualized as activities (cf. Arievidtch, 2003) through which people position themselves among other people and vis-à-vis important, and inevitably moral, matters of life. That is, certain aspects of the self-as-activity processes can be reflective, but not in the old sense of mental contemplation detached from real life. Instead, reflection too is an activity that subordinates and prioritizes other actions and activities. It is never simply 'in the head', because, for example, what the person stands up for or fights against is never some purely mental construct; it is always some real-life matter out there, in the world, such as social justice or certain ways of living one's life.

The leading role of the self as organizing and directing all other pursuits and activities of a person is yet another meaning conveyed by the notion of self as a leading activity. It captures the idea that the self is not separate from other activities that individuals conduct and engage in, but instead is inherent in the totality of a person's life. Thus, it is never apart from other aspects of life (e.g. those that are intellectual or emotional and even those that might appear as 'pure' acts of perception), and permeates all that a person does in life, including seemingly mundane or a-practical actions. Using again the example of what the traditional accounts of science present as a putatively value-free activity of theory-building, it can be shown that the pivotal dimensions of a theory can be revealed if it is analyzed within the context of a leading activity of its creator. In this case, for example, Vygotsky's theory can be revealed as a value-laden instrument and vehicle of his and his colleagues' collaborative and unique pursuits to develop psychology for a just society (e.g. through devising psychologically grounded educational and remedial systems for the most disadvantaged populations such as handicapped and homeless children), and thus to contribute to the creation of such a society itself. This analysis allows one to re-interpret not only the foundational premises of Vygotsky's project but also all its essential components, including its unique vision of the relationship between theory and practice, its methodology, metatheory (e.g. unique criteria of justification and objectivity), choice of participants, and the like (for details, see Stetsenko, 2004).

Finally, because the self is conceptualized as a contribution to inherently social, historically evolved forms of life and practice, it too appears as ineluctably social and historically specific. That is, by contributing to historically and culturally specific practices, the individual self gradually evolves to embody these practices and the latter begin to saturate and subsume all individual expressions and modes of acting. This is especially clear in cases when individual contributions are particularly salient and socially significant. For example, leading political and other historical figures are often hard to characterize at an individual level, that is, in descriptions that focus on aspects other than their role in the world; a

Russian novelist pointedly observed regarding one such figure: 'Gorbachev is such an entirely political creature, and yet so charismatic, that it's hard to come to any conclusions about him as a person. Every attempt I know of has failed miserably' (Tolstaya, 1998). And yet such an apparently total saturation of everything 'individual' in an individual by what is traditionally considered to be the social dimension (i.e. by one's achievements and mission in the world), instead of testifying to the omnipotence of society, might represent an ultimate expression of human individuality. Indeed, it is perhaps especially the individuals able to discern the often tacit developments and hidden shifts taking place in a society and uniquely contribute to these developments who are also able to 'stand out in the crowd' and thus achieve the highest levels of individuality and uniqueness, as if completing the circle in which the seemingly opposite poles of social and individual are brought together.

Thus the self appears as simultaneously social and deeply individual, that is, not supra-individual, as in some previously discussed transactional approaches, in that it is always carried out from a unique position in time, place and history, and in a unique direction determined by individual commitments. The concept of the self as a leading activity that contributes to the world therefore embodies both the human relevance of social practice and the practical relevance of human subjectivity, and reveals human development as taking place at the interface of social and individual dimensions of life that are essentially blended into one. In this sense, any mature individual can be seen as reflecting the totality of social life and human history rather than as its subordinate and replicable 'element', and society can be seen as driven by individuals who achieve their distinctiveness and individuality by making their unique contributions to society, sometimes even through discerning the zone of its proximal development and realizing the movement into this zone. Conceptualizing these simultaneous processes of a mutual co-creation of the self and society helps us to move beyond the dichotomy of individual versus social and to reveal the dialectical unity (although not the equivalence) of these two equally important aspects of human life and development.

On a final note, it should be noted again that the arguments advanced here continue Leontiev's account of the self and the overall gist of the cultural-historical activity theory, especially in (a) seeing activity as the foundation of the self and (b) overcoming the ego-centered stance in favor of viewing the self as incorporated into a general system of social relations. A number of more specific points are also congruent with those by Leontiev. For example, he also mentioned that the development of the self cannot take place within consumption only but instead presupposes a shift toward 'production, which alone does not know limits' (A.N. Leontiev, 1975/1983a, p. 226). He also maintained that an expansion of activity takes place not only in the direction of the past but also in the direction of the future, and that this

direction is represented in the self (p. 220). Leontiev made these points, however, literally in passing, on the very few last pages of his work devoted to the self, as if charting new possible directions for further analyses. Therefore, the suggestions to expand Leontiev's account of the self are made here in the spirit of revisions 'from within a theory' (cf. Stetsenko, 1995)—a type of a critical transformation that, unlike the extremes of an uncritical acceptance versus outright rejection, is congruent with the central idea of activity theory itself about transformative practices being the condition necessary to sustain the development of people and of their creations, including the life of a theory.

Conclusions

Establishing the principal sources of the self, as well as its existence and relevance, in collective material transformations of social life signifies a break with an 'ontological mutism' typical of so many previous accounts (cf. Ansoff, 1996) and a movement toward a clear commitment to a materialist ontology of human subjectivity coupled with a humanist ontology of materialism. Such an approach, founded on premises developed in cultural-historical activity theory by Vygotsky, Leontiev and their collaborators, emphasizes the dialectical unity of intersubjective and intrasubjective processes as being rooted in material processes of production and as playing an indispensable practical role in collective social life and human development. Within this perspective, traditionally mentalist constructs such as the self appear in their practical relevance—as an important mechanism allowing people to participate in and contribute to social collaborative production of their lives. The concept of the self as a leading activity is grounded on the premise that uniquely contributing to social life is the essence of humanness and human individuality. Thus, the proposed expansion of CHAT does not simply bypass the dualism between individual and social processes that still persists even in Vygotsky-based and transactional perspectives. Instead, it suggests a resolution by explicating specific processes that make their dialectical unity possible. That is, it indicates what the self is made of, where it is located, what its purposes and relations to society, practice and social life are. This conceptualization opens ways to address the dialectical manifold transitions among all important facets of a unified system of human social life—the collective practices of material production, the social interactions among people (resulting in such qualities as relatedness and dialogism of social life) and the self—such that the agentive role of both individual and social dimensions in human development is revealed and ascertained. Arguably, such a framework can help us to further explore ways

of integrating the now disconnected perspectives on the self, merging their important insights and inviting a dialogue among them to ultimately enhance their contribution to the world we all live in.

Notes

1. 'CHAT' is a relatively new term that has not yet acquired a conventional meaning (cf. Cole, 1996). In this paper, this abbreviation is used to denote the investigative project developed by Vygotsky, Leontiev, Luria and their immediate co-workers and followers—Zaporozhets, Bozhovich, Levina, Morozova, Slavina, Elkonin, P.I. Zinchenko, among others. This is done following the long-established tradition in Russian psychology that (a) emphasizes the collaborative nature of the research project by Vygotsky and his immediate co-workers and (b) unites Vygotsky's works with ideas developed by his followers together with him and after his death into one school of thought (e.g. A.A. Leontiev, 1983, 1990; Luria, 1982; Yaroshevskij, 1989; and more recently, Stetsenko, 2002, 2003).
2. It is perhaps due to these inconsistencies and gaps, as well as to the inherent complexity of CHAT, that it never established itself as a dominant psychological paradigm in the Soviet Union. Although quite influential, it was one among several alternative, and often fiercely competing, approaches such as the systemic approach, the communication-based approach, the so-called 'set psychology (*ustanovka*)' and, of course, ever-present and influential, in any country, positivist psychology. Moreover, because of a recent drastic reshuffling of all aspects of life in Russia, including science, CHAT has been abandoned by many of its own former representatives (perhaps the most vivid example is Zinchenko, see 1995, 2001). Activity theory seems to have fallen out of favor with Russian scholars today, with a few notable exceptions such as A. Asmolov, B. Bratus, A.A. Leontiev, E. Sokolova, N. Talyzina, as well as those continuing Luria's tradition in neuropsychology (see, e.g., Homskaya, 2001).
3. This principle has been efficiently used, though not specifically pertaining to the self, in Elkonin's works (e.g. 1978) on child development.
4. Cole and Wertsch (1996) argue that it is because the same mediational means are used on the social and individual planes of activity that the transitions between them are possible, making their dichotomous accounts untenable. The importance of this claim notwithstanding, further elaboration of the principal unity of individual and social dimensions in human development is warranted, especially in accounts of the self.
5. For analysis of Ilyenkov's works, see Bakhurst (1991) and Jones (1999).
6. Even in distortions of reality, as in stereotypes and illusions, the practical link of human subjectivity to reality is never eliminated. Stereotypes serve very practical purposes: for example, stifling social changes and preserving comfortable views, and ultimately lifestyles and practices, of certain dominant groups or individuals. Illusions are also 'big realists' in that they result not from some fortuitous distortions of reality but from an over-reliance, or out-of-context reliance, upon certain important features in the environment and practice.

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