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A Romantic Scientist. Introduction

Janna M. Glozman

Lomonosov Moscow State University,
Moscow, Russia

ОТ РЕДКОЛЛЕГИИ

Романтический ученый. Вступление

Жанна М. Глозман

Московский государственный университет имени М. В. Ломоносова,
Москва, Россия

Corresponding author. Email: Glozman@mail.ru (Janna M. Glozman)

Around the world, Luria is best known as being a romantic scientist. Following Max Fervern, Alexander Romanovich divides scientists into classics and romantics and he once defined the difference between classical and romantic scholars:

Classical scholars are those who look upon events in terms of their constituent parts. Step by step, they single out important units and elements until they can formulate abstract, general laws [...]. One outcome of this approach is the reduction of living reality with all its richness of detail to abstract schemas [...]. Romantic scholars' traits, attitudes, and strategies are just the opposite. They do not follow the path of reductionism, which is the leading philosophy of the classical group. Romantics in science want neither to split living reality into its elementary components nor to represent the wealth of life's concrete events in abstract models that lose the properties of the phenomena themselves. It is of the utmost importance to romantics to preserve the wealth of living reality, and they aspire to a science that retains this richness. (Luria, 1979, p. 174)

Patient description in romantic scholars not only precede explanation, but sometimes replace it. Michael Cole (2005) considered, that Luria was a happy combination of both approaches, or perhaps it is because Alexander Romanovich remained a romantic to the end that he became a historical figure. Dissecting, dividing and analyzing reality, he never lost his sense of wholeness of life (Zinchenko, 2005).

Such an approach corresponded to the vision of the psychological science that animated Luria from his earliest work, his first book, written in 1922, but published only in 2003 (Luria, 1922/2003). In this book, Luria first had formulated the main principle of the cultural-historical approach in a psychological study: to analyze a human as a unity of social and biological.

The social does not just “interact” with the biological, but it also forms new functional systems, using biological mechanisms, provided with new forms of work; namely, within the creation of such “functional formations” there lies the emergence of the higher forms of conscious activity that appear on the boundary between the natural and the social [...]. (Luria, 1977, p. 26)

The human nature is not fatefully determined by the neurophysiology, the biology, he is born with, but that this may be richly modified by his life experiences, by his culture. Luria, indeed, goes much further, and shows the role of the historical, the cultural, the interactive, not merely in modifying, but in actually making higher nervous functions *possible*.

Thus, the development of language was never seen by Luria as an automatic development of “language areas” in the brain, but as resulting from the interaction of mother and child, from the negotiation of meanings between mother and child, as being in the mode of interaction or “betweenness” and this as a prerequisite for, and needing to be structuralized in the developing neurolinguistic systems of the brain. (Sacks, 1990, p. 188)

A. R. Luria underscored the creative, formative role of social origins, which mediate the appearance of conscious activity; namely, these social sources determine its appearance and functioning, through natural human prerequisites. The “natural” is used only as the necessary precondition in the process of the social mediation of human conscious activity, a form of mediation that serves as its real origin and determining factor. “And the key to this was the perception of the individual as a *being*, a living being, containing (but transcending) organic functions and drives, a being rooted in the depths of biology, but historically, culturally, biographically unique” (Ibid., p. 189).

Oliver Sacks appreciated very high this Luria’s approach: “It is characteristic of genius to contain great contradiction and richness, but at the deepest level to resolve these into an ultimate unity” (Ibid., p. 186).

Truly scientific observation is not merely pure description of separate facts. Its main goal is to view an event from as many perspectives as possible. The eye of science does not probe “a thing,” an event isolated from other events or things. Its real object is to see and understand the way a thing or event relates to other things or events. *Only after these basic factors and their consequences have been identified can the entire picture become clear.* The object of observation is thus to ascertain a network of important relations. When done properly, observation accomplishes the classical aim of explaining facts, while not losing sight of the romantic aim of preserving the manifold richness of the subject. (Luria, 1979, pp. 177–178)

The same romantic approach characterized the second famous book by Luria *The Nature of Human Conflicts* (1932/2002), that was severely criticized by Ivan Pavlov. “You call this science! Science proceeds from elementary parts and builds up. Here you are describing behavior as a whole!” (Sacks, 1990, p. 183).

Luria saw such reductionism as the very essence of 20th-century science, in medicine, as well as in physiology, and psychology.

In psychology it seemed that by reducing psychological events to elementary physiological rules, we could attain the ultimate explanation of human behavior. In this atmosphere, the rich and complex picture of human behavior, which had existed in the nineteenth century, disappeared [...]. The physicians of our time, having a battery of auxiliary aids and tests, frequently overlooks clinical reality [...]. Physicians who are great observers and great thinkers have gradually disappeared. (Luria, 1979, pp. 175–176)

Luria could express this romantic approach fully and openly, in his two late books: *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (1968/1987); *The Man with a Shattered World* (1972/1987). In these two short books about exceptional patients, Luria gave voice to an entirely new genre of scientific research — a case study — “which combines the nomothetic and idiographic approaches that have split psychologists since the beginning of the discipline, providing his own resolution to what is generally referred to as ‘the crisis in psychology.’” (Cole, 2005, p. 40). If one’s subject is a human life (not atoms or stars) then it is not just “life” in some general theoretical sense, but *a life* — the living and structure of an actual human life — that must become the subject of the fullest scientific observation.

Such romantic books (“neurological novels”) as *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (Luria, 1968/1987), or *The Man with a Shattered World* (Luria, 1972/1987), were widely read bestsellers for different generations.

Luria invited psychologists to follow his example, and describe in detail cases of extraordinary development of certain psychological faculties, because such cases can help us to better understand the whole. A case history merely exhibits a syndrome and its development. Oliver Sacks (1986) came to write a story *The Lost Mariner* (in *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*) under influence of Luria.

M. Cole put a question: “Why in his book about S. V. Shereshevsky, (the man with an unusual memory), did Luria spend so much time discussing his personality when

his memory was at issue?" (1979). Even when focusing on one separate psychological function, the memory of a mnemonist, he deduced other personal traits from this study. His romanticism is considered to be humanistic, rather than scholarly, something which appeared to be very unrealistic to his friends, colleagues, and disciples, but proved a real part of his personality. "All took on the quality of an intricate piece of music with a few central motifs and a variety of secondary theme" (Luria, 1979, pp. 195–198).

Another point is that Luria's interest in people, his ability to be absolutely impressed by them, as well as his sensitivity, led to the personal relationships with Shereshevsky and Zaslavsky. During many years, he observed the mnemonist, Shereshevsky, and the patient, Zaslavsky (*Fig.*). Both men described in these books became his friends.



Figure. Luria and Zaslavsky

In both books (*The Mind of a Mnemonist* and *The Man with a Shattered World*) I describe an individual and the laws of his mental life [...]. I choose to write about two men each

of whom had one feature that played a decisive role in determining his personality and which set him apart from all other people. In each case, I tried to study the individual's basic trait as carefully as possible, and from it deduce his other personality traits [...]. Thus S. V. Shereshevsky (the hero of Mnemonist) had an outstanding memory, which dominated his personality. However, it was not his memory itself, but rather its influence on his life and personality, which formed the subject of the book [...]. By contrast, my second book using the approach of romantic science began not with an outstanding capacity, but with a catastrophe that had devastated a man's intellectual powers [...]. I observed this patient for thirty years. The book about him is in no sense an "imaginary portrait" [...] but rather a true portrait that is also an attempt to come closer to understanding some psychological facts through the use of neuropsychology." (Luria, 1979, pp. 179–180)

Luria "always knew the necessity of the *qualitative* in studies, and equally, of the historical, the *biographical* in science — at least if one was to study a living being, a human being" (Sacks, 1990, p. 184). Although Luria was endlessly resourceful in inventing cognitive tests of all sorts, he would only administer these *in the context of the individual*, varying them and improvising them, according to the individual and his history.

"To write true stories, to construct true lives, to present the essence and sense of a whole human life — in all its living fullness and richness and complexity — this must be the final goal of any human science or psychology" (Ibid., p. 193).

The qualitative study of personality for every attempt to find factors underlying the structure of personality and each subject's cognitive functioning are the main particularities of the case studies, published in this issue of *Lurian Journal*.

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